

The Imperfect Church – 9
 The Tolerant Church
 1 Corinthian 5:1-13

Introduction

The list of sins that Paul confronts in 1 Corinthians is quite lengthy. The Corinthians were guilty of:

Disunity	Homosexuality
Power plays	Abusing others
Relying on human wisdom	Abusing freedom
Valuing their own intelligence over God's	Prostitution
Disrespecting the Gospel	Bad marriages
Disregarding the Holy Spirit	Divorce for unbiblical reasons
Jealousy	Violating conscience
Spiritual immaturity	Leading others into sin
Hurting the Church	Testing Christ
Boasting	Fellowshipping with demons
Judging others	Confusing gender roles
Pride in their achievements and possessions	Fighting during communion
Hubris, thinking they didn't need God	Spiritual gifts for own glory
Defying God given authority	Unloving
Grotesque sexual sin	Chaotic, disordered worship
Misunderstanding grace	Denying the resurrection
Celebrating wickedness	Idolatry
Suing one another in court	

TS –This is what makes 1 Corinthians so challenging to deal with. It seems kind of dark and foreboding. Sin after sin, confrontation after confrontation. Can't we just talk about God's love? Let's talk about grace, we like grace. Why do we have to deal with all this sin stuff? Isn't Paul being a little judgy? Shouldn't we acknowledge that people are sinners and sins like this in the church are to be accepted, dismissed, maybe even celebrated? After all, shouldn't we be proud that these sinners find church to be comfortable and welcoming? I mean, at least they're coming to church.

So goes the contemporary church model in America. All we want is for more people to attend our church, so we will dismiss anything they do, and we will do all we can to make people feel comfortable. The Bible categorically denies this mentality and clearly informs us that it is wrong. Of course we want people who do not know Jesus to attend. Of course we want to help people grow from immaturity to maturity. But making people comfortable in their sin is not the way to go about doing that. The Church is serious business. Being part of The Church is serious business for two primary reasons:

1. The Church Belongs to God

Paul has already been establishing this truth for us. 1:2 – I am writing to God’s church in Corinth. 2:1 - The Gospel is “God’s secret plan.” 3:6-7 – God makes the church grow. 3: 9 – The Church is “God’s field, God’s building.” 3:16 – The Church is the temple of God. 3:23 – we belong to Christ. 4:2 – we are merely managers for the Master/Owner of the Church. 4:4 – we are accountable to the Lord himself. 4:21 – we live in God’s Kingdom.

This entire thing called The Church is God’s enterprise from beginning to end, start to finish. He conceived it, Jesus died for it, God calls people into it, he sits supreme over it in authority, and Jesus will return to hold it accountable. We don’t get to decide what we are going to do with the Church. It is never about our vision, our direction, our strategic plan. We don’t run this thing; Jesus is the Head of the Church. And as such:

2. The Church Represents Jesus to the World

As the Body of Christ, we are his representation in and to the world around us. What the Church must always be asking is this: are we representing Him well? When the world looks at us, are they getting an accurate, biblical picture of him? So yes, we absolutely show love to people. Yes, we show mercy and understanding. Yes, we welcome and invite. Yes, we show grace. But let us not forget...the chief attribute of God in the Bible is holiness. To represent the Lord accurately and biblically, this characteristic must be top on our list.

Paul has already been establishing this truth for us as well. 1:2 – “I am writing to God’s church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be his own holy people.” In chapter 3 he confronted their lack of spiritual growth. 3:2-3 – “I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren’t ready for anything stronger. And you still aren’t ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren’t you living like people of the world?”

Steve Lawson – “Every believer has been chosen by God from eternity past for Heaven later, but for holiness now.”¹

TS – with all that as the backdrop, let’s look at our text for today.

¹ Steven Lawson, Twitter post, 3/25/19, 9:28pm.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 – I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you—something that even pagans don't do. I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother. ² You are so proud of yourselves, but you should be mourning in sorrow and shame. And you should remove this man from your fellowship.

³ Even though I am not with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. And as though I were there, I have already passed judgment on this man ⁴ in the name of the Lord Jesus. You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. ⁵ Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns.

⁶ Your boasting about this is terrible. Don't you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old "yeast" by removing this wicked person from among you. Then you will be like a fresh batch of dough made without yeast, which is what you really are. Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. ⁸ So let us celebrate the festival, not with the old bread of wickedness and evil, but with the new bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. ¹⁰ But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. ¹¹ I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people.

¹² It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. ¹³ God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you."

TS – With this explosive, counter-cultural text, Paul offers three corrections to the problem of sin in the church. He corrects their sin, their theology, and their misunderstanding.

1. CORRECTION TO SIN

Now remember, in the text right before this, Paul has just established his authority over them in the Lord. He now comes blasting out of the gate with this corrective. There is in the camp and it must be dealt with. V. 1 - I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you—something that even pagans don't do. I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother.

The word he uses here for “sexual immorality” is the Greek word *porneia*, one which our culture knows so well. And it was one their culture knew so well. Again, these Corinthian Christians had been saved out of pagan environment but had trouble severing ties with it. William Barclay puts it this way:

“Paul is dealing with what, for him, was a constantly recurring problem. In sexual matters, the Gentile world did not know the meaning of chastity. They took their pleasure when and where they wanted it. It was so hard for those in the Christian Church to escape the influence of this attitude. They were like a little island surrounded on every side by a sea of idolatry; they had come so newly into Christianity; it was so difficult to unlearn the practices which generations of loose living had made part of their lives; and yet, if the Church was to be kept pure, they must say a final goodbye to the old ways.²”

Sadly, though, this was a specific kind of sexual immorality that is addressed here (he will deal with more generic sexual sin in chapter 6). This man is having a sexual relationship with his stepmother (phrase literally translates as “father’s wife”). We don’t know the specifics such as...is the father dead, did they divorce, was this one of his father’s many wives, was his father a Christian? But here is what we do know...Paul does not ever specifically address the sinner himself. He addresses the church about the sinner in their midst. V. 2 - ² You are so proud of yourselves, but you should be mourning in sorrow and shame. And you should remove this man from your fellowship.

This church had been so arrogant (we’ve seen that countless times so far). They are prideful (same word he uses earlier...literally puffed up). They think they are such a big deal. Yet, in the midst of their supposed awesomeness and spiritual greatness, this grievous sin is being committed in their midst. Maybe they aren’t that spiritually great. Maybe before they boast, they should ensure there is something to boast about. And here is the correction: Remove this man from your fellowship.

v. 3-5 - ³ Even though I am not with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. And as though I were there, I have already passed judgment on this man ⁴ in the name of the Lord Jesus. You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. ⁵ Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns.

² William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 52.

Paul has already passed judgment, declaring this man guilty of this sin. And he assumes the Church is going to agree and move forward with this. The answer is to “throw this man out.” This is called church discipline, and this is about as counter-cultural as you can get. This feels so judgmental. I mean, doesn’t Jesus tell us in Matthew 7 to “not judge?” Where’s the grace? Friends, this is grace. Toleration of sin is not grace. Dismissal of sin is not grace. Excusing, even celebrating, someone’s sinful decision is not a loving thing to do. Church discipline benefits the church (which we will see why in a little bit) and it benefits the person being disciplined. Barclay continues:

“Discipline sometimes has to be exercised for the sake of the Church. To shut our eyes to offences is not always a kind thing to do; it may be damaging. A poison must be eliminated before it spreads; a weed must be plucked out before it pollutes the whole ground. Here, we have a whole principle of discipline. Discipline should never be exercised for the satisfaction of the person who exercises it, but always for the benefit of the person who has sinned and for the sake of the Church. Discipline must never be vengeful; it must always be for the purpose of prevention or cure.³”

This man is to be “handed over to Satan.” Now, this doesn’t mean for eternal damnation, or for execution for his sin. This is simply a way of saying “out of the church.” Numerous times the NT refers to the world around us as Satan’s domain. He is referred to as the “god of this age.” So to remove someone from the church is to communicate that “you are outside the loving protection of the Lord and his covenant people. You are now living in Satan’s domain, which your actions show you wanted anyway.” As harsh as that sounds, notice the intended result at the end of v. 5 - **so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns**. The point of church discipline is for ultimate restoration. This is not for condemnation (which is what Jesus was commanding against in Matthew 7). This is to purify the church and protect the sinner.

2. CORRECTION OF THEOLOGY

v. 6-8 - **⁶ Your boasting about this is terrible. Don’t you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old “yeast” by removing this wicked person from among you. Then you will be like a fresh batch of dough made without yeast, which is what you really are. Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. ⁸ So let us celebrate the festival, not with the old bread of wickedness and evil, but with the new bread of sincerity and truth.**

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 54.

“Your boasting about this is terrible.” Over the last several weeks we have watched as Paul dismantled their fascination with worldly wisdom that had defined them. And we could easily ask, “what’s so wrong with worldly wisdom? We are smart.” This is what’s wrong with worldly wisdom. When you follow it you start to look like and sound like the world. And in this case, this man is committing a sin that even the pagan Corinthians frowned upon. And the church boasted about this sin. They were proud of how tolerant they were. “Look at how inclusive we are. We let anyone into our church. See, we’re loving. You all that talk about this holiness stuff are judgmental bigots, on the wrong side of history.” It’s the same kind of garbage that gets shoved down our throats today. All of it comes from bad theology.

So Paul corrects their theology of sin. “Don’t you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole patch of dough.” We minimize sin because we do not know the reality of it. The Bible views it like a toxin that spreads. It only takes a tiny packet of yeast to infect and inflate a large batch of dough. This is an image that is used throughout the Bible. From the very beginning God used yeast (or leaven) as an illustration of evil influence. Jesus told his disciples to “beware of the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees.” Beware of their evil influence. This is what sin does. Barclay writes:

“An easy-going attitude to sin is always dangerous. It has been said that our one security against sin lies in our being shocked at it. The nineteenth-century Scottish historian and moral teacher Thomas Carlyle said that we must see the infinite beauty of holiness and the infinite damnability of sin. When we cease to take a serious view of sin, we are in a perilous position. It is not a question of being critical and condemnatory; it is a question of being wounded and shocked. It was sin that crucified Jesus Christ; it was to free us from sin that he died. No Christian man or woman can take an easy-going view of it.”⁴

What’s the solution? Remove the yeast. Then the Church will be pure like God intends it to be. In fact, he says here at the end of v. 7 that we are to remove the sinful yeast and become this new, pure, batch of dough...” which is what you really are.” Jesus gave his life for the purity of the church and we need to take that seriously. He has made us a new creation and we need to live out the reality of that.

⁴ William Barclay, [*The Letters to the Corinthians*](#), 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 52–53.

He references back here to the Passover event in Exodus where God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. After unleashing 9 devastating plagues on Egypt, it was the 10th and final one that finally was enough...the Death of the Firstborn. To commemorate their deliverance, the Israelites were to eat a special meal...the blood from the sacrificed animal was to cover their doorways so that when the destroyer angel came, he would see the blood covering them that marked them as God's people, and he would pass over them and go to the next house. And they were to eat bread that was made without any leavening. In fact, the Passover is also called the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The blood symbolized the protection of God's people and the unleavened bread symbolized the purity of God's people.

Paul looks back on that reality and says...this is true for you. Jesus, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us and his blood covers us, marks us as his own people. And we are to commemorate that, live out that reality, by ensuring there is no corrupting leavening in our midst. And man, that is challenging right? These are our friends. These are our brothers and sisters. We care about these people. And that is exactly Paul's point. If you really love these people, then this is what you will do...not just for their restoration, but for the beauty and purity of God's Church. Richard Hays writes:

"The fact that the church so rarely exercises this disciplinary function is a sign of its unfaithfulness. Our failure to do so is often justified in the name of enlightened tolerance of differences, but in fact "tolerance" can become a euphemism for indifference and lack of moral courage... We have somehow deluded ourselves into believing that the "caring" thing to do is to be infinitely nonjudgmental and inclusive. This is quite simply a demonic lie, for it allows terrible cancerous abuses to continue unchecked in the community. Do we not know that a little cancer corrupts the whole body? Surgery is necessary; clean out the cancer so that the body may be whole.⁵"

3. CORRECTION OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Apparently Paul has written to them before. Really, what we know of as 1 Corinthians is really 2 Corinthians, and what we know of as 2 Corinthians is really 4 Corinthians. We just don't have copies of those letters. In Paul's first one to them he apparently wrote about sexual immorality and they misunderstood what he actually meant. So he corrects that here, and it is a correction we need to hear as well.

⁵ Richard B. Hays, [First Corinthians](#), Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 89-90.

v. 9-13 - ⁹ When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. ¹⁰ But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. ¹¹ I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people. ¹² It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. ¹³ God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you."

In confronting sin, he isn't talking about confronting the sin in the world. It's not that we shouldn't take a stand or try to help influence our culture, he is simply saying that the world is not our domain. The Church is our domain. According to scholars, this is most likely the reason why Paul never addresses the woman involved in this affair and what should be done with her. If she isn't a Christian, she isn't under any authority in the church. But this man, who is part of the Church, is under that authority. And this is why this is challenging to hear. In our world, something done by two consenting adults in private is exactly that...private. Who are we to say anything about that? Paul punches that idea right in the face. Once you belong to the Church, nothing any of us does is ever private. It is the moral responsibility of the Church to insert itself into our lives for correction.

But the world? No. They are God's responsibility to judge. We cannot expect unbelievers to act like believers. Nor can we allow believers to act like unbelievers. This is where the Church typically gets it backwards. We tend to let sin slide amongst ourselves in the name of not judging, but we loudly condemn the sinful world around us. Nope, turn that around. We don't judge outsiders...but we absolutely judge insiders.

1 Peter 4:17 - ¹⁷ For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin with God's household. And if judgment begins with us, what terrible fate awaits those who have never obeyed God's Good News?

Friends, this is hard stuff. But this is biblical stuff. And we must take it seriously. God certainly does. So from a place of love and humility, we must care about our brothers and sisters in Christ enough, we must love the Church enough, we must love the Lord of the Church enough, to confront sin and get it dealt with. So, as the Church, it is your responsibility to confront sin in the Church. In this way, the Lord is honored, the Church is purified, and sinners are restored in grace.