

MORAL STANDARD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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The church here has started a series of study on the book of 1 Corinthians, of which the ministers have discussed the issues of division and carnality in the Corinthian church. From the summary on the book of 1 Corinthians, the Corinthian church is laden with several issues which Paul had to deal with in writing this epistle to the church and in extension to us.

At times solving a problem in the church may require more teaching, more accurate information; that is what was needed to take care of the questions concerning marriage (ch. 7). In other situations, solving church problems may require refuting false doctrine, as Paul did when he confronted the issue of the resurrection (ch. 15). Often a better attitude is needed; that is what Paul recommended to solve the problem of church members' following men and valuing worldly wisdom (chs. 1—4). Always, what is needed to solve church problems is an emphasis on love. Paul expounded on this great theme in chapter 13.

Sometimes solving a church problem requires drastic action. That was the case with the problem described in our text today, **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**. We will be doing an exegesis of the entire verses to understand these texts better. We will all need an open mind, irrespective of what we know about this subject matter to be able to appreciate this chapter better and understand what church discipline entails.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (*An Exegesis*)

The problem is addressed

1. The sin of an unnamed Christian in Corinth (vs 1)

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife!

- a. ***It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you:*** The term **sexually immorality** is the ancient Greek word "*porneia*." It broadly refers to all types of sexual activity outside of marriage (including homosexuality). Originally, "*porneia*" just referred to going to prostitutes; but before New Testament times, the Jewish community used the word to refer

to any kind of extramarital sex, including homosexuality. This is its sense in the New Testament. I will prefer to go with this definition also.

- b. ***That a man has his father's wife***: Apparently, someone was having an ongoing sexual relationship (either as married or living together) with his stepmother (**his father's wife**). I do not think the woman involved is a Christian, for she was not addressed in Paul's letter.
- c. ***And such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles***: Paul understood that this kind of incestuous relationship was considered taboo even among the pagans of their culture, yet the Corinthian Christians seem accepting of this behaviour.
 - i. The ancient Roman writer and statesman Cicero said this type of incest was an incredible crime and practically unheard of. Truly, it was **not even named among the Gentiles**.
 - ii. It should have been enough that this is declared sin by the Bible (***Leviticus 18:8, Deuteronomy 22:30 and 27:20***); it should have been enough that the worldly culture itself considered it sin, but the Corinthian Christians did not seem bothered by it at all.

2. The reaction of the Corinthian church to the sin.

And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.

- a. **And you are puffed up and have not rather mourned**: As bad as the sin itself was, Paul was more concerned that the Corinthian Christians seemed to take the sin lightly, and they were unconcerned (**have not rather mourned**) about this behaviour.

Previously in the letter, Paul dealt mainly with the “*mental*” problems of the Corinthian Christians: their wrong ideas about God's power and work and His servants. Now Paul starts to deal with their “*moral*” problems. But the two are connected; their moral problems come because they aren't thinking right about God and His word.

- b. **That he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you**: Clearly, this was Paul's solution to the problem – to take this notoriously unrepentant man away from the protection of the fellowship of God's people. Yet, the Corinthian Christians were not doing this. Why not? How could this kind of thing be allowed?

Remember that Corinth was a city notorious for sexual immorality, and the pagan religions did not value sexual purity. It was not hard for a Corinthian to think you could be religious, yet still act any way you pleased when it came to sex. Greek

culture could matter-of-fact say: “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children.”

This act was long condemned in the Old Testament? **Leviticus 18:8** expressly forbids a man to have sex with his stepmother (*The nakedness of your father’s wife you shall not uncover*). More than anything, the Corinthian Christians probably allowed this in the name of “tolerance.” They probably said to themselves, “Look how loving we are. We accept this brother just as he is. Look how open-minded we are!” We should never underestimate what people will allow in the name of “open-mindedness.”

- c. **And you are puffed up and have not rather mourned:** The Corinthian Christians were *proud* (**you are puffed up**) of their acceptance of this man; they thought it said something *good* about them! But instead of glorying, they should have grieved, both for the man and for what they must do to him (**be taken away from among you**).

3. Paul’s prescription

For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

- a. **Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh:** How could they **deliver such a one to Satan**? By putting him outside the church, into the world, which is the devil’s “domain.” The punishment is a removal of spiritual protection and social comfort, not an infliction of evil. Note that when we are in fellowship with the saints, we are in fellowship with God – **1 John 1:1-5**.
- i. God often protects us from the attacks of Satan, even when we never knew about the attacks (**Job 1:10** and **Luke 22:31-32**).
 - ii. The fact that so many can leave many congregations without a second thought shows how weak those congregations really are. Shouldn’t there be a place a person under discipline, put outside the fellowship, would miss? But doesn’t it also say something about a Christian if they can willingly neglect the assembling together of the saints – and prefer their isolation?
 - iii. Paul’s command also served the important purpose of removing any false feeling of security the sinning man might have among the fellowship of Christians. They couldn’t just ignore his sin, and let him ignore it, pretending it wasn’t there. If the man refused to face his sin, the church must face it for him, for his sake and for their sake.

- b. **For the destruction of the flesh:** The purpose of putting this man outside the spiritual protection and social comfort of the church was the **destruction of the flesh**, not the *body*, but his rebellious **flesh**.

This man, though a Christian, was at this time given over to the sins of the flesh. Paul says that as they put him out, the man will be given over to the sinful consequences of his flesh, and the hope is that by wallowing in the results of his sin, the sinful impulse of the flesh in this particular area will be “*destroyed*.”

- c. **That his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus:** The *goal* of the discipline is clear – the salvation, not the destruction, of his spirit. Though this man’s conduct was clearly sinful, and needed severe correction, Paul does not write him off as forever lost – the effective use of church discipline may yet see him to salvation.

All discipline in the church is to be carried out in this attitude of restoration, not condemnation. As Paul also wrote, *And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)*

“Church discipline is not a group of ‘pious policemen’ out to catch a criminal. Rather, it is a group of broken-hearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore an erring member of the family.” (Wiersbe)

The Procedure for Withdrawing Fellowship

God specified the action that was to be taken at the time that fellowship is withdrawn. We should remember that the removal of fellowship is not the first step to be taken regarding the brother who goes into sin. Other passages teach us to go to that brother and try to bring him back (**Galatians 6:1; James 5:19, 20**).

Matthew 18:15–17 outlines three steps preceding withdrawal:

- i. A Christian should go privately to the brother who has sinned. The purpose of this visit is to seek his repentance. When he repents, he is to be forgiven; then the process stops because “*you have won your brother*.”
- ii. If he does not repent after such a visit, one or two others are to join in another visit. Again, the first goal of this visit is to get the brother to repent; the second is to establish the accuracy of the facts in the case. Once he repents, he is to be forgiven. If he “*refuses to listen*,” then the third step is necessary.
- iii. “*Tell it to the church*.” The purpose again is to seek the sinful brother’s repentance. If he listens to the church, this reprimand can save his soul. If he will not listen to the church—either to individual voices or to the collective

voice of warning and encouragement of the whole congregation—the brother is to be disfellowshipped. Christians are not to associate with him.

- iv. Disfellowshipping a brother is the last step to be taken because all else has failed.

When we do take that step, we should notice the impressive nature of the actions involved. The apostles are present with us, and we act by their judgment (**1 Corinthians 5:3, 4**). The whole church is present (**5:4**). This is not done by the elders or the preacher(s) but by the whole church. It is done by the power or authority of Jesus Christ (5:4). It is done publicly: “*deliver such a one to Satan*” (5:5). The church publicly announces that the person withdrawn from is no longer to be considered one with those in the church. Satan has taken control of his life; and by disfellowshipping him, the church acknowledges that control.

In withdrawing fellowship from a member, a congregation must do so correctly! Among other things, the facts must be established. No prejudice can be involved. (*For example, church leaders’ families cannot be treated more leniently than others.*) The sinning member is to be approached personally by other church members. The whole congregation must be involved, and love for the church member and for the church (not revenge for some petty grievance) should be the motive for the action. The repentance of the sinning member must be sought.

Sometimes practicing corrective church discipline has caused more problems than it has solved. Almost always, when that has happened, the fault lies in the failure to follow biblical guidelines rather than in the practice itself.

The Reasons for Withdrawing fellowship

God also gave specific reasons for the withdrawal of fellowship. Fellowship should be withdrawn from unrepentant sinners for at least two reasons.

- i. *First, corrective discipline is for the good of the individual—that he might be saved (5:5). The “destruction of his flesh” is the destruction of the sinful lusts which have gained control of his life. “That his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” refers to the ultimate salvation of his soul in heaven.*
- ii. *Second, the withdrawal of fellowship is for the good of the church (5:6–8). “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (5:6). The sin of the offending brother is likely to affect the whole congregation. Any sin which goes unrebuked can have a bad effect on the church. Allowing a false teacher to continue to cause division will destroy a congregation. Others may follow the bad example of the one who is sinning—or members may say, “If he can do that, I can do this.”*

To tolerate open sin in a congregation may lead people to think that we condone sin. Then the church may become the object of scorn and ridicule among the

community. Non-Christians may say, *“If they approve of such behaviour, I could never have any part in that church.”* Even worse, some may think, *“If they approve of such actions, I want to be a member there—then I can live my life the way I want and still have a clear conscience.”*

We are to *“clean out the old leaven so that [we] may be a new lump”* which is unleavened and *“celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”* (5:7, 8). The *“feast”* that we celebrate may be a reference to the Lord’s Supper. If so, Paul was saying that, once the offending member is excluded from the fellowship, we can observe the Lord’s Supper in *“sincerity and truth.”* This is only possible if we have removed *“malice and wickedness”* from our midst.

Church discipline may encourage church growth. After God Himself *“disciplined”* two members (*Ananias and Sapphira*), *“great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things”; “And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number”* (Acts 5:11, 14). Outsiders who see that a church takes its convictions seriously enough to discipline sinful members may be attracted to that church. People who desire to serve Christ want to be members of a congregation that is serious about its commitment to Him.

The Consequences of Withdrawing fellowship

How is the one withdrawn from to be treated after this withdrawal takes place? Basically, we are *“not to associate”* with him (5:9); we are *“not to company with”* him (KJV). In 5:10–13, Paul cleared up a misconception for the Corinthians. He had told them in an earlier letter not to have fellowship with evildoers. They evidently thought he meant not to associate with evildoers in the world. Paul noted that it is impossible to avoid such company completely (5:10). It is also inappropriate to judge, or condemn, those around us; God is their judge (5:12, 13). Of course, Paul’s teaching here is qualified by other Scriptures, such as those which tell us not to be *“bound together with unbelievers”* (2 Corinthians 6:14) and warn us that *“bad company corrupts good morals”* (1 Corinthians 15:33).

However, in the letter mentioned in 5:9,16 Paul was not talking about those in the world; he was referring to those in the church. In this sense, therefore, the church is required to render judgment.

Some restrictions that are placed on our fellowship with a Christian who has been withdrawn from are not placed on our fellowship with one who is not a Christian. We see in verse 11 the extent to which fellowship is to be refused: The Corinthians were not even to eat with this man. This requirement must be understood in the context of the close fellowship that Christians had in the first century. It was customary for them to eat together. For such a withdrawal to have its proper effect

today, we must have close fellowship with one another. What difference would it make to a brother to be excluded from eating with other brothers and sisters if church members never shared meals together anyway? Table fellowship implies togetherness. This social interaction which Christians enjoy as part of the body of Christ is not to be extended to the one who has been disfellowshipped because of sin.

When fellowship has been withdrawn, the relationship between the disciplined brother and other members of the congregation is different. Previously, the person who is being disciplined had close ties with his fellow Christians; they even ate together. Now, however, he is no longer welcome at their love feasts.

While Paul said that Christians are not to associate with the sinful brother, he also said that we are not to “regard [the person disfellowshipped] as an enemy” but should “admonish him as a brother” (2 *Thessalonians 3:14, 15*). The requirement to “admonish him as a brother” tempers Paul’s instruction “not to associate” with a disciplined brother. On some levels, we can associate with him. We can visit in his home, for example, for the purpose of admonishing him as a brother.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes a church with problems must do what Corinth was instructed to do: withdraw fellowship from an immoral church member. The best advice that could be given to such a congregation is “Just do it!”

Let us consider the example of a man who goes to the doctor and is diagnosed with cancer. He is told, “You have cancer. We could remove the cancer, but that would require major surgery. It would be expensive, time-consuming, and painful. However, I care too much about you to put you through that ordeal—so, instead of an operation, I’m prescribing an aspirin a day and plenty of bed rest.” What would the patient say? He would surely object: “Don’t talk to me about aspirin and bed rest! I need surgery! I’ll go through all the pain and expense to save my life!”

In a similar way, practicing church discipline is difficult, time-consuming, and painful. However, it can, in effect, save the life of the whole church. It is better to lose one member—even in a painful operation—than for the whole body to perish!

Reference:

David Gulak (2018) - 1 Corinthians 5 – Confronting Immorality In The Church – Enduring Word ([Enduring Word Bible Commentary 1 Corinthians Chapter 5](#))

Coy Roper (2010) - A Church Needing Major Surgery (Truth for Today – www.biblecourses.com)