

Rather Mourn and Remove Him

1 Corinthians 5

Turn to 1 Corinthians 5. That chapter is a hard teaching. Paul tells the Corinthian church to put the sexually immoral man out of the church, and explains why the congregation needs to do that.

I grumbled to myself a bit that I had never heard anyone speak in church on this chapter. Why not? Then I thought: I've been preaching a long time, and I've never covered this either. Don't complain about others. Today we'll talk about 1 Corinthians 5.

I once had a church history teacher that specialized in the early fathers. Early fathers wrote from right after New Testament times to about the year 400. This teacher told the class that the ancient church's favorite New Testament books were Matthew and 1 Corinthians.

They liked Matthew, he said, because Matthew had lots of Jesus's teaching. And they liked 1 Corinthians because 1 Corinthians dealt with all the problems they kept facing in their churches. This sermon is mostly from 1 Corinthians, but we'll look at Matthew as well.

1 The Setting: Sexual Immorality in the Corinthian Church – 1 Corinthians 5:1–2

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and a sexual immorality that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?

This is the only time incest comes up in the New Testament, but Moses has strict rules about incest in Leviticus, and Moses included this particular kind of incest. Leviticus still counts. Roman society was very permissive, but they drew the line at incest.

It is possible that this man and his father's wife have deep affection for each other. Perhaps they care a great deal for each other. That never comes up because it does not matter. There are certain relationships that God does not want ever to see among his people, and a man with his father's wife is one of them.

This immoral man will be in the church when this letter first gets read to the church, but Paul ignores the man. Paul goes after the church. For Paul, the bigger problem is the tolerant church, not the immoral man. They are proud, they think they are spiritual people, and yet they tolerate this behaviour in their church.

They should have mourned and put the man out. They should have mourned that this sin was happening in their church, and that they must put the man out. That would have been the right response. Now we'll detour to a few other Scriptures, to help us understand 1 Corinthians 5, and then we'll finish 1 Corinthians 5.

2 The Precedent of Jesus: A Sinning Brother or Sister – Matthew 18:15–17

Jesus taught his disciples about putting someone out of the church.

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

“Treat them as a pagan or tax collector” means “they are no longer part of the church, they are outsiders.”

Does it say “if your brother or sister sins” or does it say “if your brother or sister sins **against you**”? The two little words “against you” are textually uncertain. Some ancient New Testament manuscripts include these two words, and others do not. Even the experts disagree about whether or not Matthew included “against you.”

The commentaries on Matthew that I looked at said those words should be omitted. We should just read, “If your brother or sister sins, go to them.” Omitting these words seems to make more sense, considering Jesus’s other instructions about brothers and sisters.

So we have here the teaching of Jesus that guided Paul in 1 Corinthians 5. Jesus taught that if people would not turn from their sin, they should be removed from the church. This means the sin has to be significant. We’ll take a look at that now.

3. Why So Severe? They Will Not Inherit the Kingdom – 1 Corinthians 6:9–10

Two verses in 1 Corinthians 6 help us understand why the church must take drastic action.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

These words are not complicated. They are just hard to believe. “Will not inherit the kingdom of God” means they will not inherit eternal life. They will not be saved from final judgment. Twice Paul says they will not inherit the kingdom of God, and he also says, “do not be deceived.”

We all sin. James says we all sin in many ways. I assume that all of us struggle with one or more things on this list. I do. God’s people do these things. When we sin in these ways, we regret it, we repent, we confess, we aim our lives toward right living.

But the man in Corinth chose to make his immoral relationship a part of his life, and for that reason his situation was spiritually desperate. He was very close to joining those who do not inherit the kingdom.

In Matthew 15, Jesus lists things that defile us, and his list reads much like this list in 1 Corinthians 6. Jesus also puts sexual immorality and adultery near the front of his list. The reason these sins defile us, says Jesus, is that they come out of our hearts. In 1 Corinthians 6, when Paul lists the things that keep people from inheriting the kingdom, he is repeating what was passed down from Jesus himself.

4 The Jesus Myth: All Mercy, No Demand

One more thing before we go back to 1 Corinthians 5: a Jesus myth. There's a myth inside and outside the church that says Jesus always welcomed and received sinners, that he accepted all people just as they were. We repeat his story about the prodigal son, for example. We talk about all the times Jesus got in trouble for eating with the wrong people.

Jesus did welcome and receive sinners. That's not the myth. The myth is that these welcoming stories are the whole story. They are not. The "kind Jesus" stories are placed side by side in the Gospels with his stern stories and teaching. Here are some examples.

The Sermon on the Mount ends with four warnings. The first is "*Narrow is the gate, and steep is the path that leads to life, and few there are that find it.*" Three more warnings come after this. Jesus welcomed everyone to follow him, but he did not make following him easy.

In Matthew 18 he told his disciples, *If your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.* Entering into eternal life is costly. No wonder he said the gate was narrow.

Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors because he came to call sinners, not the righteous. But he also said that many are called, but few are chosen. See also Luke 13:24–27.

"Lord, Lord." Jesus told two stories in Matthew where people who thought they were his devoted followers find themselves outside in the final judgement. In both cases they say, "Lord, Lord." But the door was closed and they were outside (Matthew 7, 25).

The rich young man in Matthew 19 wanted eternal life. He did many things that pleased God, but Jesus asked one thing more: sell all you have, give it to the poor, and follow me. The man became sad and walked away. Jesus let him walk away.

If we heard that story about a different preacher, we'd probably criticize that preacher. We'd say: "why did you set the bar so high? Why did you not follow him and bring him back?" But we cannot criticize, because this was Jesus. If the story was about someone else, we'd say, "Jesus would never have done that." But we can't say that, because Jesus did it.

I don't know if these things scare you, but they sure scare me. Thankfully there is unending daily forgiveness for those who seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Let's seek his kingdom and his righteousness.

But here's the point: we need to drop the myth that says Jesus would never have treated the sinner like Paul did in 1 Corinthians 5. Jesus certainly would have supported Paul. Their teachings were consistent with each other. Now back to 1 Corinthians 5.

5 Paul Responds to the Corinthian Setting – 1 Cor 5:3

There is sexual immorality among you, an immorality that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?

[Paul's response] *For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this.*

Should Paul be judging anyone? Jesus taught in Matthew 7 that we should not judge, so that we would not be judged. So why is Paul judging? As Matthew 7 goes on, we realize that Jesus warning is against a critical attitude, a judgemental condemning attitude.

In the same chapter Jesus tells us that we'll know false prophets by their fruit. Good trees don't produce bad fruit, he said, and bad trees don't produce good fruit. We'll know them by their fruit. That means he wants us to watch how people live, evaluate them, and make a decision. Keep your eyes open. Without a critical spirit.

That's why Paul said, "should you not have mourned and put him out?" They should not be judgmental, they should mourn. They should not condemn, but grieve and be distressed that they need to put the person out. They should grieve their loss. He is also clear that mourning does not mean delaying.

So Paul had already passed a verdict on this man. Paul was not in Corinth any more, he was not physically a part of that church body. But he had planted that church, and had lived in Corinth for a long time. In his spirit he was there with them. He was acting as one who was a part of that congregation.

Don't miss that Paul does this in the name of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus himself stands behind what Paul is doing, and Paul knows it. Paul acts here as a messenger of Jesus.

6 What the Congregation Will Do, and Why – 1 Corinthians 5:4–5

So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 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.

So, says Paul, when you Corinthian believers next meet together, and remember I will be with you in spirit, and the Lord Jesus will be with you in power. Then hand this immoral man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.

The church is God's realm, and the world is Satan's realm. So "hand him over to Satan" means "put him out of the church and into the world."

Flesh here probably means the man's sinful appetites, his sinful way of living. Put the man into the world, Satan's domain, so that his sinful appetites take a beating and his wrong living will get pruned.

Notice this: put him out "*so that his spirit will be saved on the day of the Lord,*" at final judgement. This is crucial, people. Get this. He will be in Satan's realm, but the Lord is not finished with him, not at all. The Lord is resolved that this man will not be condemned with the world. The Lord intends this man to inherit eternal life.

In 1 Corinthians 11, a few chapters later, some others believers there were being disciplined by the Lord. Why did the Lord discipline them? So that they would not end up condemned with the world! Not because the Lord was angry, not because he was fed up. The Lord disciplined them to save them, so that they would not be condemned with the world.

Put the man out of the church, into the world, so he can be purged of his sinful living and his spirit can be saved on the day of the Lord. When we just let things go because we are supposed to love people, we don't understand how the Lord's love works. He wants these people to inherit eternal life. He wants their spirits to be saved. He does not want them condemned with the world. His plan for the sinner requires churches to obey him. This is a hard call.

The Corinthian church failed the Lord in several other ways, as we can see in the Letter. So the churches that obey 1 Corinthians 5 are not perfect churches. We are all sinners, so we must remove this person with humility. No self righteousness at all, rather humility. On the other hand, the Lord wants even churches with other problems and failings to hear the call of this chapter.

7 Leaven in the Congregation – 1 Corinthians 5:6–8

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

When sin is ignored in the church, that sin contaminates and defiles the whole congregation.

Israelites normally made bread with yeast, but during Passover they ate only unleavened bread. During that week, there must not be any yeast anywhere in the house. Unleavened bread was holy, and because of Christ, the Corinthian church really is a new unleavened batch of dough.

"Get rid of the old yeast" meant "put that man out, because he is defiling and polluting the whole church." The whole church becomes evil and offensive before God, just because this evil in their midst. By not dealing with this situation, the church is disobeying God.

Here's the thing, people. Putting the man out is to save the man, and it is also to save the church. It is that simple. In Philippians 1, Paul prays that their love will abound more and more *in knowledge and depth of insight*. Our love needs to be directed by knowing God's ways.

It is not enough just to love. Genuine love can be naïve and sometimes even damaging. Our love needs insight into God's ways. Paul prayed that the Philippians would have that. We need to pray for that. Putting the man out is to save the man and the church. It shows God's love for both.

8 Judge Those Inside – 1 Corinthians 5:9–13

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

Paul wrote a letter to Corinth before 1 Corinthians. We don't have it, it's lost. In that letter, Paul told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. He meant immoral people in the church, but the Corinthians preferred to take it as immoral people in the world. I suspect this was a deliberate mistake on their part.

In any case, Paul makes clear now that he means “don't associate with a sexually immoral person who claims to be a brother or sister.” Of course we'll associate with these people in the world. But not in the church. He's very clear about that.

Sexual immorality is not the only dangerous sin. If someone in the church is resolved to have more money, or if their life is ruled by alcohol, or by anger, or if someone simply cannot get along with others, or if someone's speech often reviles and attacks others, etc. These sins often aren't as obvious as sexual activity, but they are just as dangerous, and they keep people out of the kingdom.

Believers struggle with these sins. We know this thing is wrong, we repent, we move away, and we fall again. There's room in the kingdom for this. That is quite different than a so-called believer who intends to make these things a part of their lives, with no genuine repentance at all.

Paul ends with a line that Moses used 5 times in Deuteronomy. *Expel the wicked person from your midst*. Paul gives that command with no introduction. This was still God's command to the Corinthian church, which means it is also God's command to our churches. God will judge those outside, the church will judge those inside.

9 Four Highlights

1 We mourn as we remove the sinner. We grieve our loss. We are sad and distressed that we need to do this. That is the only godly way to carry this out.

2 We remove the sinner with humility. We are all poor in spirit, and we all sin in many ways. Humility.

3 We do this to save the sinner, not to punish. We do this so that his or her spirit will be saved on the day of the Lord. The Lord is not finished with that person. We obey the Lord because he does not want that person condemned with the world, and this is the part we play in his plans.

4 We remove the person to save the church. We do this in mourning, we do this humbly, we do this to save the sinner, and also to save the church. This entire chapter speaks to the church about its failure, not to the immoral man about his failure. When we the church fail to act, we defile and contaminate the church body. This grieves God.

In our day, this is almost inconceivable. Is this really the way God sees these things? Yes, it is. We remove the unrepentant person to protect the church, to save the church. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, this stuff is so strange to us, almost like listening to a foreign language. What this Scripture says is clear enough. We can hardly believe that this is how it is. Send your Holy Spirit to guide us in these things. Father, work in us to will and to do what pleases you. That is our only hope. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.