

Lesson 16: Dealing With Immorality Part 1, 1 Corinthians 5:1-8, Craig Crawshaw**INTRODUCTION**

Chapters 1-4 of 1 Corinthians was essentially Paul's calling out the arrogance of the church in not focusing on God's wisdom found in the cross of Christ. He urged them to access the mind of Christ within them by the indwelling Holy Spirit and move on to maturity by building on the foundation of Jesus, following His example of servanthood.

Now, in chapters 5 and 6 respectively, he addresses two very specific and critical problems that he had heard existed in the church as communicated by Chloe (a female leader in the church) and her people (1:11). It is to Paul's credit of graciousness that he held his tongue on these matters through four chapters of setting the “big picture” of the problem in Corinth – that of arrogant pride. But now he launches into the specifics of these two problems: in chapter five, the problem of sexual immorality gone unchecked; and in chapter six, the problem of disputes between Christians being taken to the pagan law courts.

Though both of these problems were specific to the Corinthian church, the principles that are taught are ageless, and well worth our close attention.

1 Corinthians 5:1-8 *It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles; that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.*

For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to 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.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

THE SPECIFIC ISSUE

Apparently, there was a younger male member of the Corinthians church who was sleeping with his father's wife – undoubtedly a stepmother, as she is not called his mother, but “his father's wife.” Chances are she was a younger second (or third) wife of his father, and he was attracted to her and had an ongoing affair. Ongoing is implied from the phrase “has his father's wife” which seems to indicate more than a one-time occurrence, and from the fact that most all the church were aware of this situation. We can also assume that the father and his wife were not members of the Corinthian congregation, for they are not called out in any way for their part in this sin – only the father's son.

This sin was certainly an issue. But further, Paul is amazed at the apparent acceptance of this situation by the congregation. He attributes it again to their arrogance – apparently thinking this behavior was not that “big a deal.” Maybe they were even proud of their “tolerance” and “acceptance” of alternative sexual choices. Does that attitude sound sadly familiar? After all, Corinth had 1000 temple prostitutes descend on the city each night, so the people were already bombarded with sexual immorality all around them. Does that also sound sadly familiar to our culture of sexual promiscuity?

Now this young man's sin is clearly rare. Paul points in 5:1 that this immorality is not even common among non-believers. The fact that this sin is particularly disgusting makes the Corinthians' nonchalance about it all the more stunning. But from this sin of the man, and the sin of the church, we can extract importance lessons that God wants to teach his children through the ages. I see five such principles we are to learn.

5 INHERENT LESSONS

1. God's specific hatred of immoral sexual behavior

This is sin of "such a kind" and "actually reported." It is hard for Paul to even comprehend that it is happening in the church. And therefore, by extension we learn that immoral sexual behavior is especially appalling and hurtful to God and should be to us.

Yes, all sins are "equal" when it comes to separating us from God. Any sin is an affront to the holy Almighty One. But some sins arouse God's anger more than others. And sexual sin that goes against God's specific intention of sex only between a married man and woman is one of those. And I would point out that idolatry in any form is another "hot button" for God.

Do not think that we are only to learn from this passage not to have sex with a parent's new spouse. That would almost go without saying. Rather, we are to learn God's grieving and anger over fornication (sex outside of marriage), adultery, pornography and homosexual, lesbian, transsexual or queer behavior. And I am quick to point out that despite His special hatred of these sins, GOD LOVES THE PERSON EVEN IN HIS/HER ACT OF SIN. And therefore, so must we do the same. And we must teach these truths to our generation.

Yes, God still wants sexual abstinence until marriage. Yes, God still wants 100% faithfulness between a husband and wife. Yes, God made you male or female as defined by your genetics, despite your feelings to the contrary, and wants you to remain and act sexually as God created you. These are not popular statements in today's sexual revolution, but they are God's truth. To this I offer these few verses, which are among the many such declarations in our Bible, God's Word.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 *For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality (literally "fornication")*

Hebrews 13:4 *Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.*

Romans 1:26-27 *For this reason [of exchanging the truth of God for a lie] God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.*

And again, I must be quick to offer that if and when any of these sins are committed, God is willing to forgive and restore when there is sincere contrition and repentance – an acknowledging and turning away from the sin and toward God for renewal.

2. God's expectation that the church will discipline its own for immoral sexual behavior

Paul is not only appalled by the sin of immorality, but he is also appalled by the church's lack of mournful and reactive response to the sin of one of its own. In verse 3 he calls out their sin as (1) arrogance – for feeling above the need to confront, (2) not being mournful – not realizing the sin was hurtful to God and would hurt the church, and (3) nonreactive – not taking action to reprove and remove the sin from their midst.

Paul goes on in verse 4 to say that though he was not there in person, he was able in the spirit to determine the correct course of action – that is, to discipline by removal from the church body. The implication is that they should have been able to reach the same conclusion. By extension, this is telling us today that the church must take action to confront and discipline known overt sexual immorality within its congregation.

Jesus taught the correct process in Matthew 18:15-18: (1) go the offender in private, one on one; (2) if he/she does not repent, return with two or three witnesses to confirm the facts; (3) if still no repentance, tell it to the church that they might confront the sin; (4) if still no repentance, regard him/her as a rebellious outsider, which we take to mean, remove such a one from the fellowship of the church.

3. There is a time for “delivering over to Satan” for the ultimate hope of “restoring to God”

Removal from the church body is the appropriate action, if there is no repentant response to the multiple pleas. But this principle, taught in verse 5 is the accompanying reason and prayer. The removal is not only to discipline the individual and purify the body of the sin. Further, it is to strip the individual of the love, nurturing and accountability of the body, described by Paul as delivering “to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.” This sounds cruel and heartless but note that it is for the express goal of causing the one to finally realize their error and repent.

It is assumed that this is a church member and believer, so loss of salvation is not in question. The question is whether this prodigal will return. Since there was not returning in the multiple pleas of the church, this one is sent into the world – the domain of Satan – removed from the care of the church, in hopes that like the prodigal son of old, he/she will finally realize the error and repent and return to God.

The timeless principle is that there is a time and a place to cease pleading with a rebellious believer, and let them go their own way, in the prayer that the “pig-sty” of the world will jar their senses back to the Lord. This is “tough love” – and especially tough for the one who releases. But prayers will continue, and love always hopes for the prodigal to return.

4. One unchecked sin in the body will contaminate the whole

This principle is taught in verse 6. It is true for each of us as a person – one unchecked sin makes us unclean before God and dirties up even the “clean” parts of our person. It is also true for the family unit – one unchecked sin in the family affects all. But in context, the primary application is for each individual church. An unchecked and ignored sin – particularly sexual immorality – will cause the church grief and stunting of spiritual growth until it is dealt with. “Do you not know” this? asks Paul. The implication is that you should know this!

The answer follows in verse 7: “clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump.” How? – through Christ, our Passover, who has died as the sacrificial Lamb who will “pass over” our sin once it is cleansed by His blood and removed.

This speaks of our mutual accountability to each other in the church body. We join for worship, fellowship and ministry, yes. But we also join to hold each other accountable to be faithful Christ-followers. We “keep watch” over one another’s souls. Our leaders have this primary responsibility and authority (Hebrews 13:17) but we are all our “brother’s keeper.”

Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.*

And we should each be glad for many loving, watchful eyes around us. When one is not seen for a while, we reach out to check on him/her. When there is concern for straying behavior, we challenge and admonish in love. And when there is clear misbehavior, we don’t ignore or simply pray, but we go one-on-one to begin the process of reconciliation. May we each take seriously the principle that one unchecked sin in the church body will contaminate the whole, and that keeping accountable is a responsibility of all.

5. There must be a way to determine who is accountable to the church and who is not

Now here is a principle that is not directly taught but is clearly implied. If someone walks into the church as a visitor, even a clearly believing visitor, and sexual immorality is discovered, are we to begin the process of church discipline? No - they are not a part of our church, subject to our accountability. Now if they are indeed a Christian, we might confront them individually as brother to brother, but it would not be a church matter. And they would still be welcome in our church service, for all sinners are welcome in the hopes that God will convict and do His work.

Paul was determined to “excommunicate” the offending man in our passage because he was a regular believer associated with the Corinthian church, known to all. He was what we might call a “member” of the Corinthian church. And therefore, he was subject to accountability by the church.

The principle is that there must be a way to determine who is accountable and who is not. One way is by regular, repeated attendance and association. But I believe a stronger way is by church membership,

which is essentially a choice by an individual to align with the doctrine and purpose of a church and accept the mutual accountability it brings. At Oaks, we believe we have a responsibility to our members beyond what we have to our regular attenders and visitors, for they have affirmed our membership covenant.

Hear what one phrase of our church covenant says, that all Oaks members have affirmed: "It is my commitment and desire to... encourage and stimulate one another toward Christian maturity." That is mutual accountability. You are accountable to the church, and the church likewise is accountable to you.

This principle is why I believe membership in a church body is so critical. Yes, you can vote. And it might make you feel more a part of a church family. But just as adoption into a family unit makes one far more attached to that family than just being a resident in that household, so membership makes one far more mutually accountable to growth in Christ.

SUMMARY

So, do you have the five inherent lessons of this passage?

1. God's specific hatred of immoral sexual behavior
2. God's expectation that the church will discipline its own for immoral sexual behavior
3. There is a time for "delivering over to Satan" for the ultimate hope of "restoring to God"
4. One unchecked sin in the body will contaminate the whole
5. There must be a way to determine who is accountable to the church and who is not

May each of us keep our bodies and our church family "clean" of sexual immorality for the glory of God. And may it never be "actually reported that there is immorality among you." Amen.