

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 4: Dealing with Immorality in the Church -- 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

Every family has a moment it would rather not talk about, the thing everyone knows and no one names. In Corinth, the thing everyone knew was a scandal. A man in the church was living with his father's wife, a relationship so far over the line that even the pagan culture around them found it shocking. And here is the part that stops you cold: the church was not grieving over it. They were proud. They were puffed up. Somehow they had turned a blind eye and called it broad-mindedness, maybe even celebrated their own tolerance and freedom.

Paul is having none of it. "Ought you not rather to mourn?" he asks. Where there should have been grief, there was applause. Where there should have been action, there was a shrug. And Paul, though far away in body, says he has already passed judgment on the situation as though he were present, because some things are not up for debate. The man is to be handed over, removed from the fellowship, for a purpose that is anything but cruel: "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

Then Paul reaches for an image every Jewish believer would feel in their bones. Before Passover, every scrap of yeast had to be cleaned out of the house. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump," he warns. Sin tolerated does not stay quietly in its corner; it spreads, it normalizes, it reshapes the conscience of a whole community. And he gives the deepest reason of all for purity: "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." A people bought by the blood of the Lamb cannot make peace with the very sin that nailed him to the cross.

This is a hard chapter, and an easy one to misuse. Paul is not telling us to go hunting for sinners or to feel superior to the world. Just the opposite, he says we are not to withdraw from the immoral people of the world at all; we would have to leave the planet. His concern is the holiness and health of the church, the family of God. Read it carefully. It will challenge our age's instinct that love means leaving everything alone, and it will show us a harder, truer love that refuses to let a brother destroy himself, and refuses to let sin quietly rot the household of faith.

Group Discussion: The Corinthians were "arrogant" and puffed up about a serious sin in their midst when Paul says they should have mourned and acted (5:1–2). Why do you think a church might be tempted to ignore or even take pride in tolerating sin, and what does our culture often get right, and get wrong, about the relationship between love and acceptance?

Personal Reflection: Paul warns that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (5:6), picturing how a small, tolerated sin spreads. Is there a "little" sin in your own life that you have made peace with, told yourself is no big deal, and quietly allowed to stay? What might it be slowly leavening in you?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

Study Questions

1. Paul is shocked not only by the sexual immorality in the church but by the church's response: "And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?" (5:1-2). What does it reveal about a church when it can be confronted with open, serious sin and feel pride or indifference rather than grief?
2. The Corinthians had reframed their tolerance of sin as a kind of openness or strength. Where have you been tempted to relabel sin in your own life, calling it freedom, a personality trait, or no one's business, so that you no longer have to grieve over it or deal with it? What would honest mourning over that sin look like?
3. Paul writes, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (5:7). How does the image of leaven explain the way tolerated sin spreads in a person and in a church, and how does the sacrifice of Christ as our Passover give us both the motive and the power to live pure lives?
4. Paul roots the call to purity in what Christ has already done as our Passover Lamb. When you consider that Christ was sacrificed to free you from sin, how does remembering the cost of your redemption change the way you regard the sins you are tempted to keep? Where do you need to "cleanse out the old leaven" this week?
5. Paul instructs the church to deliver the unrepentant man over "for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (5:5). What does this teach about the purpose of removing an unrepentant member from fellowship, and how is even this severe action ultimately aimed at the person's restoration and salvation rather than at mere punishment?
6. Church discipline is meant to wake a person up and call them home, not to crush them. How do you tend to respond when someone who loves you confronts you about sin? Are you more likely to grow defensive and distance yourself, or to receive correction as an act of love? Where do you need a softer, more teachable heart?
7. Paul clarifies that he is not telling them to avoid the sexually immoral "of this world," since then they "would need to go out of the world," but rather not to associate with anyone who "bears the name of brother" yet lives in unrepentant sin (5:9-11). Why does Paul draw such a sharp distinction between how we relate to the unbelieving world and how we relate to an unrepentant member of the church?
8. Paul assumes Christians will live among, and stay in contact with, sinful people in the world, while holding the church to a different standard. Are you actually engaged with people outside the faith, building real relationships with those who do not yet know Christ, or have you quietly withdrawn into a Christian bubble? Where might God be calling you to be more present in the world without being shaped by it?
9. Paul asks, "Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside," and he commands, "Purge the evil person from among you" (5:12-13). What responsibility does this passage give a local congregation to guard its own holiness, and how

should a church carry out this difficult duty in a way that is both firm about sin and aimed at restoring the sinner?

10. Look back across the whole chapter. Paul calls a complacent church to grieve over sin, to cleanse out the leaven, and to love a wandering brother enough to act for his salvation. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from 1 Corinthians 5 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 18:15–17, the steps for confronting a sinning brother with the goal of winning him; Galatians 6:1–2, restoring a fallen brother gently while watching ourselves; 2 Corinthians 2:5–11, comforting and restoring the one who has repented; Hebrews 12:5–11, the loving discipline of the Father; James 5:19–20, turning a wanderer back and saving his soul