

The Letters From Paul – Session Eight

Dear Corinthians: Toss the Bum Out!

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

Quick: Choose the most troubled and problematic church of the first century. If we could ask Paul he would likely say Corinth. Corinth dates back to the early Neolithic period and held area-wide prominence until 146 BC when Rome conquered and destroyed it. Julius Cesar re-founded and rebuilt the city in 27 AD, making it a regional seat of power for the Roman Empire.

Corinth was/is laid out with an advantageous shortcut for overland and water trade/travel. This allowed for Corinth to become a wealthy, cosmopolitan, multicultural and heavily pagan city. The population was made up of transplanted Romans, many Greeks and a large Jewish contingent.

The Temple to Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love and beauty, towered above the city where it featured 1,000 Temple prostitutes in service daily. Having intimate relations with a temple prostitute was seen as a spiritual act that honors the goddess. This goddess cult would be problematic for the new Jesus movement in many ways, specifically the topic of today's study.

Pagan worship options also included Greek gods/goddesses Demeter, Kore, Artemus, Nike, Tyche, Poseidon, Apollo, Zeus, Helios, Askhepios, Pan and Dionysos. To say that finding a religious outlet in Corinth was easy would be a grand understatement.

Aside from the persuasive pagan influences in Corinth was the disparity in the church related to socio-economic status. Rich-poor and slave owner-slave issues would grow and greatly impact the vitality of the church. Our focus today is not related to any of the above. Today's focus is a unique moral issue that Paul took on in a very firm and direct manner.

The Issue

Within the amazing lax mentality of the Corinthian Church the list of church issues seemed endless. In Chapter 5 Paul takes up a confusing and gross issue within the church

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with the father's wife, and you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you?
(1 Cor. 5:1-2)

O.K., let's dispense with the ick factor and clear-up any confusion about this relationship: this was the man's stepmother and not his biological mother. Either way it's not a good thing but it could be off the charts worse if it had been his actual mother.

Common in Corinth

The cultural and societal norms had infiltrated the new church, so sexual immorality was an increasing problem. Why? How? Mainly due to the preponderance of sexual options allowed by the various pagan religions, specifically the cult of Aphrodite. It's a safe bet that the members most open to lax sexual mores, especially the unusual couple in question, were Gentiles and not Jews. Jews, for the most part, were solid on sins related to sexuality.

Deuteronomy 20:30 states "A man shall not marry his father's wife, thereby violating his father's rights". Deuteronomy 27:10 adds "cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife, because he had violated his father's rights. All the people shall say, Amen!"

I think this rule/law/statute deserves more than an amen. How about a, "*Uh, really, do we need a rule for this?*"

It Was a Man's World

We know that older Jewish men were prone to divorcing their older wives for younger women. Call it a loophole in the law. For something as silly as burning the toast you could send your wife away and she would have little recourse.

This would mean that many stepmothers existed and I suppose that increases the potential for “stepmother illicit relationships,” or it did in Corinth at least.

Paul's Command

What did Paul have to say about that messy issue? Paul was at his punitive, hardball best on this one.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who had done such a thing (vv. 3-4)

O.K., so Paul passed judgment on this person and in a couple of verses we will read his verdict (and it ain't pretty). So Paul is judging, right? In Matthew 7:1 Jesus says plainly, “DO NOT judge.” So, can he do this?

When you are assembled and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (vv 4-5).

Paul's instructions are harsh and punitive: “release this man over to Satan for the destruction of his rebellious flesh, in the hope that his spirit may be rescued and restored in the day of the lord” (v.5, Passion Translation). The Applied New Testament Commentary tells us: “Paul's decision (judgment) was that the man be expelled from the church, after the body assembled to pray and attend to this issue and the man.” Either way, Paul says to toss him out. Again, can Paul do this?

Paul had become both judge and jury and the church is told to follow through. Many questions arise at this point and we will try to deal with them in general and in an attempt to glean what any/all of this means to today's church.

- I. First, should Paul have judged the man? Jesus said to not judge others, but Paul judged. Most theologians see this as a judgment on the particular sin and not on the person. This is the whole “hate the sin love the sinner” mantra the church espouses.

Have you ever thought about that statement? Are we willing to admit how difficult that task is? It seems the Corinthians were being told to do both: cite the sin and throw the bum out.

- II. Why was Paul so harsh? Likely because this sin was egregious and the church seemed oblivious to it. If this level of sin became prevalent, the church would become more and more like the pagan groups they were called to stand in total contrast to. I suppose this is the whole “one bad apple” mentality.

The church of Jesus Christ was to be the *high road* and the counter-example of a new and pure way to live.

If the church became yet another example of selfish religion it would fail and worse, would dishonor and waste the entirety of Jesus’ life and sacrifice.

- III. Paul called out the church for its arrogance and seeming disinterest in moral guidelines

And you are arrogant! Should you not have mourned? (v. 2a)

Verse six indicates they even boasted about their tolerance. Paul was saying that all believers and Christians must live toward a spiritually-dictated level of morality that was so different from the world that it would be like light penetrating the darkness.

- IV. Paul wanted the man turned out and given over to Satan. This sounds rather harsh but it’s clear the man was to be an example for all to see. That admitted did he really want the man to be doomed to hell? Likely not. A way to see this is that once he was expelled he might see the error of his ways, repent and recover.

The Applied New Testament Commentary states that there are only two kingdoms in play: God's Kingdom and the Kingdom of Satan. When the man was expelled from the one he automatically entered the other. It's binary. The choice is God or Satan. That's a scary realization, but it's accurate.

Salvation Theology

We as Baptists believe that if a person is a true follower of Jesus their salvation is secure. Do Christians sin? Do some Christians sin in big ways, like having affairs with their stepmother? Yes. And worse. Should they be expelled from the church and kingdom for really bad sins? If so, which sin bumps them up against the line and which sin pushes beyond the line? Who gets to stay and who has to go? And, who makes that call? Today's church rarely goes this route. We do not "toss" people, or we do not officially do so anyway, so this is a hard situation to contextualize.

Takeaways

1. We do not excommunicate people from the church today. Let me clarify and specify: Baptists do not toss people out of the fellowship. So, we see this section in ways other than when to expel people. Our takeaway should focus on the pernicious affects of sin to the whole community of believers.
2. Perhaps the focus for us is to rehabilitate and assist people who are having serial sin issues. This would suggest that certain issues must be addressed, which leads to which issues merit addressing, and then who will do the addressing, and honestly, the list could go on. The modern church doesn't seem to be structured for this type thing.
3. At the very least Paul is saying that anyone practicing obvious and egregious sin should not be associated with, especially someone in the church. This presents a problem if we admit that Jesus spent much of his time with the immoral and profane, but we aren't Jesus in any sense as he was basically immune to the pitfalls of hanging around with the immoral. No one was going to lead Jesus astray. Satan tried and failed miserably so Joe Schmo wouldn't be able to pull it off.

We are vulnerable to temptation but if we seek to be spiritually strong it is possible to safely spend time with the non-redeemed with the intention of influencing them toward God.

Our calling is to reach, teach and disciple. That can't be done if we spiritually shelter-in-place and never "get out there to be salt and light."

But, and this is a very big nonetheless, the "one bad apple" analogy does fit and is very true. The church must be kept as holy as possible. *Holy* means *set apart* and different. Think *unique*. If the people who make up the church aren't working hard to be as spiritual, pure and holy as possible, the church won't be the answer for the ever-so-needy world that we are called to reach.

So, let's hate the sin but love the sinner; let's strive to be as pure as we can be; and let's never be afraid to be mix it up with the unredeemed. They are our mission field. They are our calling.

It can be put this way: First pure and second sharing the Gospel with word, deed and lifestyle.

God will take care of the rest.

Amen and Amen

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