

First Corinthians

February 9, 2025

Chapter 5

How to Handle Immorality in the Church

“A Tough Decision in the Midst of Clashing Divisions”

A. Immorality Matters (5:1-6:20)

1. Paul’s Understanding of the Immorality in the Church (5:1-8)

a) The Report (5:1-2)

As we will see in this section of Paul dealing with immoral matters in the Church, this is not the first time Paul has written to the Corinth Church on this matter. A previous letter to this Church is mentioned in Chapter 5:9. We do not have that letter. Nevertheless, Paul remembered it and will refer to it. At this point, Paul has heard the report from Chloe’s messengers, and we have come to Paul’s understanding of immorality in the Church. Paul says,

¹ 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. ² You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

The word “immorality” is the word *fornication*. Fornication is sexual activity between two unmarried persons. If the person were married, Paul would have used the word *adultery*.

The severity of sin in this fornication relationship is such that even among the Gentiles, Greeks, and Romans, it is looked down upon. The sin is a son is having a sexual relationship with his step-mother. Paul uses the word “*even*” *purposefully* in his report. Why? He says “*even among the Gentiles*” because it is an absolute sin among the Jews, listed in the Levitical Law (Leviticus 18:8). The LORD did not leave us without an example of the penalty for this sin. When David was old, he took a wife named Abishag. She took care of David as his wife until his death. The Scripture tells us she was beautiful (1 Kings 1:3). After David’s death, Adonijah, one of David’s sons, asked Bathsheba to ask Solomon if he could have Abishag as a wife. Because he asked for his father’s wife, his stepmother, Adonijah, was executed immediately. Solomon did not have to consider his judgment on his half-brother’s request. It was the Law.

When Paul says, “*You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst,*” he means that the members of the Church have turned a blind eye to the problem and refused to address it. As you can see in the verse, Paul expected the two to be “*removed from your midst.*” That is, removed from the fellowship of the Church. In addition, Paul is shaken that, according to the report, the members of the Church have not grieved over the issue.

Sadly, fornication, as well as adultery, is widespread in the Church. In the last 50 years of my ministry, it has come to my desk almost weekly. I might even say that it is the number one fuel that runs the engine of the proverbial “grapevine.” The gossip mill, we might say. How have I seen it handled in these 50 years? In the first 20 years, to my knowledge, it was basically ignored. And yes, I am implying that the saints and the leaders of those Churches were immature saints like those in Corinth. But, in the last 30 years of my ministry, things were handled differently with both fornication and adultery. I know this because, in my position, I was usually the first to suspect and

confirm. Why do I say that? The benevolence of the Church was in my department. One thing that constantly runs true is this. When people cannot meet their basic financial needs, sin is undoubtedly in their family camp. With sin in their family camp, the LORD withholds His blessings until the sin is corrected. Once the conversations about considering the Church's ability to help, the needy would drop a word here and there that would eventually be enough to ask a point-blank question and receive an honest answer to confirm the sin. Once the sin was confirmed, I asked the members to immediately remove themselves from all Church positions, including Bible study leadership, childcare, diaconate, and ad-hoc support volunteers. Then, I would notify the pastor of my instruction. How did I know that I could do this? In my first two years of ministry with that pastor, when he heard of such sin, he asked me to investigate and handle the members; therefore, I had his delegated authority to make and enforce the decisions. In addition, their membership status was changed to "watch-care." They were no longer members in good standing with the Church. With that status, a gentle and careful ministry began with each. Not all ministry ended well, as you might imagine, but many did under the direction of the grace of the LORD.

Paul was not in Corinth, but that did not matter to him. He trusted Chloe. He had already made the judgment.

b) The Judgment (5:3)

Paul says in verse 3.

³*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.*

The congregation should have already judged this person and taken action. They had the Old Testament Law. Why had they not addressed the matter? With that, Paul judges him and announces the punishment.

c) The Punishment (5:4-5)

Verse 4.

⁴*In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵I 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.*

What does Paul mean when he says, "*I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.*" When Paul writes about this same man in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, we learn that he was restored to membership in the Church. Therefore, "*deliver ... to Satan*" can only mean excommunication from the membership of the earthly Church so that he might live in fellowship with the world and not in fellowship with the saints. For now, this man must be put out of the fellowship.

In the Bible, two worlds are mentioned. First, there is the world of the saints of God, controlled and blessed by the LORD. Second, there is the world of the unrepentant sinners, controlled and condemned by Satan. Delivering the saints to live in the world of Satan without access to the blessing of the world of the saints and the LORD is, in itself, a harsh judgment. Not to get ahead of the storyline between First and Second Corinthians, the judgment worked on this man and his sin.

However, Paul also mentions that the immoral saint was sent out of fellowship with the Church and into the world "*that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*" After becoming a saint, sin will still occur. Sin after sainthood cannot rob you of your salvation with the LORD.

You cannot lose your salvation. However, if you habitually sin as a saint, you will most likely cause other saints to follow in your same sin.

Staying with what we know thus far in this letter to Corinth about this matter in this letter to Corinth.

d) The Consequences (5:6-8)

Paul points the finger of this message directly at the Church for failing to handle the sinful man. Verse 6.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.

Knowing that the ignored sin of this man will foster more sins that the Church will ignore, Paul associates it with the problem of leaven. A little leaven destroys all things that should not include leaven. In the Scripture, leaven is a metaphor for sin. All sin must be swept away before the Passover meal can be prepared. Jews knew that well. And because Paul has addressed the problems in Corinth to the “brethren” in the Church, they must be the power brokers there, immature as they are but still in control. Paul desires that the Passover feast be observed in Corinth without the sin remaining in the camp. Here, Paul must have calculated the time of the arrival of this letter with Timothy and determined that the Church should excommunicate this person before Passover. As such, he would not attend the Passover feast that year.

However, the keywords in this consequence are found at the end: “*sincerity and truth.*” The Church is not to treat the sinner with “*malice and wickedness*” in the process of excommunication; rather, they are to treat the sinner with “*sincerity and truth.*” Sincerity and truth always win; malice and wickedness never win.

It is now that Paul mentions the last letter he sent to the Church in Corinth, the letter that did not survive as Scripture to be in our New Testaments. Most likely, that letter did not survive because it was so specific in Paul’s instruction that it would not apply to the universal Church as this letter does. But Paul remembers its content and his understanding of handling immorality in the Church.

2. Paul’s Understanding to Handle Immorality in the Church (5:9-13)

a) What Paul Wrote (5:9-10)

First, we hear of what Paul wrote in his first letter. Verse 9.

⁹ I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰ I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.

What is Paul saying in these two verses? As an Apostle, Paul says that the world outside the Church, filled with immoral people, is the field for evangelism to enlist new saints who will come to believe and put their trust in the LORD as Savior. You do not evangelize saints to make them saints. You evangelize sinners to bring them to sainthood in the LORD. Saints must live in the world, among all the sinners of every kind, because that is where sinners must come to know the LORD.

Therefore, we need to understand what Paul meant when he wrote his first letter to the Church about the immorality within its midst.

b) What Paul Meant (5:11)

Paul meant the following,

¹¹ But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

There we have it. In Paul's first letter, he told the Corinth Church not to associate with "*any so-called brother if he is an immoral person*" Notice that in this statement, Paul uses the word "*brother*" instead of "*brethren*." When Paul uses the word "*brother*," he means any member, Gentile or Jew. But when Paul uses the word "*brethren*," he means Jews only. Regardless of whether the sinner claiming to be a saint is a Gentile or Jew, if he is immoral, he is not to be allowed to associate with the Church. This brings us to Paul's explanation of the most misunderstood verse in the Bible by Christians and non-Christians. Paul addresses judging outsiders vs insiders in the Church.

c) Judging Outsiders vs Insiders (5:12-13)

Some of the most misunderstood verses among believers and non-believers are Matthew 7:1, "*Do not judge so that you will not be judged,*" and Luke 6:37, "*Do not judge, and you will not be judged.*" Both come from the LORD's Sermon on the Mount. Both are directed at the members of the Sanhedrin in the crowd. For example, in Matthew, Jesus tells them to get the log out of their eye before they judge the speck in someone else's eye. But in the context of that message, Jesus was speaking to the Jewish community that had the Law and knew better. Because they knew better and had the Law, Jesus said God would be the Judge. But, here, Paul is directing his words to those in the Church who have the Law and those outside the Church who know nothing about the Law. Paul says,

¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the Church? ¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

In short, saints are not to pass judgment on sinners in the world who do not claim the LORD as Savior. But it is a different story for those who call themselves saints. If they call themselves saints and participate in immorality, they are without excuse because they have the Law. For them, the Church is to put them out of the fellowship of saints. And as he said in 5:5, they are to be delivered to the world for their good.

Let us say that again in these terms. Do not judge lost people – they are your mission field. Judge saved people – they are your responsibility.

Moving ahead in Paul's letter, he will discuss the difference between a world court and a Church court. Paul has decided on the difference between the two, and the Church needs to know it.