

# Woods Chapel Bible Fellowship

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**SCANDAL IN THE CHURCH**—1 Corinthians 5:1-8

13<sup>th</sup> in a series of expositional messages from 1 Corinthians entitled, “The Art of Living”

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he Corinthian believers did not discipline open immorality because of their pride and because they failed to see its negative effects on the church.

The problem of sexual immorality making inroads into the church is nothing new. Immorality in the biblical world was every bit as prevalent as it is in the United States in 2011. The Greeks of that day barely knew the meaning of sexual purity. They took their pleasures any way they wanted it and could find it. Corinth was probably the worse.

You can imagine how that impacted the church. When these people got saved it was difficult to change their way of living. Temptation was all around them. We tend to think that the temptations of our day are so much greater with the bombardments of the media. But we need to understand that the temptations in Corinth were immense. In the city of Corinth, the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, stood atop a high plateau overlooking the city. Sex was worshiped in Corinth. Its 1,000 cult prostitutes continued to ply their profession in the city below. Many of them were no doubt housed in the lofts above the 33 wine shops uncovered in the modern excavations. Unrestrained sexual liberties were part of the culture. The pressure on the church of Jesus Christ in that day was fierce. This letter is so appropriate for what we face in our culture.

Unfortunately, the church of Corinth was not handling the problem very well. God wanted the church to make an impact on the world, but instead the world was making an impact for evil on the church. God wanted the church to reject the moral corruption of the culture, but instead it reflected that same moral corruption. The sins of the unbelieving world were finding its way into the church of Jesus Christ. We are called to influence the moral climate of the world, not reflect it.

Paul is ready to deal with this problem. After spending four chapters on the DIVISIONS in the church, he will now address the DISORDERS in the church. The first disorder he wants to talk about is moral in nature. Some of us are not going to like what he says here because he gets into the subject of church discipline. Some of us don't like the idea of being held accountable for how we live. However, if we want to be faithful to the Word of God we need to know how we handle sin and scandal in the church. In verse 1 we learn of the specific sin that invaded the church.

### **I. Blatant Immorality in the Church (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* (1). News of this immorality in the church had reached Paul. The phrase, *It is actually reported*, expresses Paul's shock that this kind of immorality was taking place in the church and it expresses Paul's understanding that this sin was common knowledge—widely known. “The church at Corinth, oh that is where that fellow is living with his father's wife.” What a sad testimony for the church! What a reproach on the name of Jesus Christ!

The word for *immorality* is the Greek word *pornea* from which we get the English word pornography. In the narrow sense it meant “to sell,” as in prostitution, but in a broad sense it referred to any illicit sexual activity. This was not some one night fling, because he says *that someone has his father's wife*. The sin was still going on as Paul writes. A church member in Corinth was guilty of a sin that even his pagan neighbors did not practice or tolerate. Whether or not the father is alive is unclear. Whether this man is married to his father's wife is something we don't know. However, it is very clear that a man is living immorally with his father's wife.

While Paul is distressed by the sin of this one man (who may have been the tip of the iceberg), he is even more disturbed by the sinful response of the church.

### **II. Arrogant Attitude of the Congregation (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* (2). They had *become arrogant* and at the same time virtually doing nothing to correct this matter. They were so puffed up they put their human wisdom above the Word of God.

The Corinthians may have actually been proud of this man's sin. In our world we see this pride in sin evidenced by those who parade their sins publicly on television talk shows. I recently heard a sound bite from one of those shows where a woman says, “If you don't

like my attitude, change yours.” She was proud of her sinful attitude. Remember that in the pagan religions of Corinth, immorality was practiced as a part of their heathen “worship.” It is possible that the Corinthians had redefined the rules so that this sinful act was looked upon as enlightened Christianity.

The Corinthian’s arrogance may have been seen in their tolerance of this sin—according to them, the loving way in which they were dealing with him. In our day, the church is often looked upon more as a “support group” than a holy assembly. It is considered to be intellectual and sophisticated to be tolerant of other people’s sin. The idea is that we have no right to disapprove of someone else’s lifestyle. They may have thought that they were better because they were so open minded about other people’s sin. It’s pride--arrogance. It is though Paul is asking, “Are you still proud of your church?” Pride keeps one from seeing the truth.

What Paul is saying here is that there is a better response than approval or tolerance. The Corinthians were maintaining an attitude of pride when the situation called for mourning. You ought to be grieving and mourning about this situation. Paul is using a word that is often used of one’s action when a love one is taken in death. That is how deep they should grieve. The man’s blatant sin broke close fellowship with God. His life now was contributing nothing to the edification of God’s people or leading others to salvation in Christ. He was cutting himself off from the joy and blessing of doing the will of God. He was putting himself in danger of divine discipline. That was something to mourn about. Genuine grief and sorrow over someone’s sin shows that we genuinely care about him. May God cause us to mourn and grieve over the blatant sin of other believers. Mourning is what should have been taking place in the church. If a church does not mourn over sin, especially sin within its own fellowship, it is on the edge of spiritual disaster.

Paul may have been thinking about Ezra. With the goal of reading through the Bible this year, I have read through the Book of Ezra. In chapter nine, we find Ezra weeps and prays and grieves before the Lord. The people who have come back to Jerusalem after captivity are committing the same sins that caused God to discipline His people and send them into captivity. It was the sin of intermarriage with unbelievers that led to idolatry—worshiping the gods of their foreign wives. Ezra is mourning over the sin of his people because he understood the complex, corrosive, and corporate nature of sin. He realizes that the ways of the world had infiltration the community who had returned to the Promised Land. He realizes the people have trivialized the Word of God and so sin was smuggled into the entire community through the back door. He understands that the sins of the people of God are far worse than the discipline they have received (9:7-15). He grieves and mourns over the sin of God’s people.

When we cease to be shocked by sin we lose a strong defense against it. Alexander Pope wrote:

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,  
As to be hated needs but to be seen;  
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,  
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

That was the pattern followed by the church in Corinth. She arrogantly followed her own feelings and rationalizations rather than God’s Word. Pride keeps the church from expelling the wayward believer.

Churches often refuse to discipline members and continue to embrace sinning saints, even when it is clear they have no intention of repenting of their sins, and even when they are publicly persisting in their sinful ways. But Christians are not to tolerate sin within the church any more than they are to tolerate sin in their own lives. Paul wrote to the Ephesians about this principle: *But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints . . . do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them* (Ephesians 5:3, 11). This is the responsibility of all church members, not simply the pastors and other leaders. When it is found we should be grieving until it is cleansed.

It seems that the church at Corinth would love the expression of our day, “unconditional acceptance.” You do not find that expression in the Bible, but it is a banner that some churches hold high. It is not a banner the apostle Paul would wave. Please look now at the . . .

### **III. Discipline Verdict of the Apostle (3-5)**

We saw the beginning of this discipline at the end of verse 2: *so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.* Why does Paul refer only to the man? Why doesn’t he mention the woman? It is probable the that women was not a believer and so she was not under the authority of the church. He was the professing Christian.

Verse 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.* Paul has the facts, carefully considered them, and reached a verdict. Discipline must be applied—he must be removed from active involvement in the church. Jesus set forth the basic method of church discipline:

*“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”* (Matthew 18:15-17).

Church discipline is a process and evidently all attempts to turn him from his sin had failed. They had followed the steps of Matthew 18—the pattern of discipline the Lord Jesus laid down—and he still refused to repent of his sin. The only alternative is to remove

him. God has already judged the sin. The church has the responsibility to follow through and be faithful in carrying out the discipline. Paul was calling on the Corinthian church to acknowledge with him the seriousness of the offense, to recognize the need for discipline, and to take the appropriate action. This had to be a difficult assignment for the Corinthian church due to its various factions that were unable to work together on anything. However, neglecting this responsibility would spell death for the spiritual power of the church.

On whose authority do we judge a person like this? Paul addresses that issue in verse 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* – that is not the end of the sentence, but we will come back to it. We want to stop to look at the authority of church discipline. He says, *in the name of our Lord Jesus . . . with the power of our Lord Jesus*. When the local church acts in Jesus’ name—according to His Word—then they are acting in His power. I think Paul is referring to Jesus’ command in Matthew 18. Jesus says if that person does not repent and turn from their sin, *let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector* (Matthew 18:17). That means we are to treat them as an unbeliever.

This is no fun, but God wants us to move ahead trusting in the power of Jesus Christ to honor us when we are obeying what He has asked us to do. He is the primary source of our authority.

But notice that authority was also in the apostle Paul. He says in verse four: *In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit*. He had God-given authority over the church, and although he wasn’t with them physically, his desire was clear. His authority reaches to us through this letter of 1 Corinthians, which is God’s inspired Word through Paul. We have the authority of Jesus Christ and we have the authority of God’s Word given to us through His apostles. That’s pretty good authority. That is not all. He says, *when you are assembled*. Here he is speaking of the authority of the church. The final step of church discipline is taken by the entire church, when they have assembled. The Lord has promised His special presence when such a gathering is assembled for discipline (Matthew 18:19-20).

Now that the issue of authority is settled, Paul gets back to the verdict itself in verse 5: *I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*. That sounds pretty ominous. What does it mean? *I have . . . delivered such a one to Satan*. There are two kingdoms operating in the world today: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. They are diametrically opposed to each other; their philosophies are all together contradictory. Satan is the ruler of this world, and turning a believer over to Satan, who is acting like he is in Satan’s domain, places the believer back into the world on his own, apart from the care and support of Christian fellowship, which God intends to keep pure at all costs. So we treat him as an unbeliever. Discipline confirms a choice that the sinner has already made.

I don’t think that means we bar them from attending the worship services of this church. We don’t bar unbelievers from attending. But they are barred from any position of influence. They are warned not to participate in the Lord’s Table with unconfessed, rebellious sin, making a mockery of Christ’s death for their sin. We treat them as an unbeliever.

The result of such discipline is *the destruction of the flesh*. Satan has no power over the spirits of believers. When Satan attacked Job, he was only allowed to harm that man of God physically. He could destroy his possessions and afflict his body, but he could not destroy his soul. The soul belongs to Christ and we have absolute assurance that he will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. But in the meanwhile the unrepentant believer may be turned over to suffer greatly at the hands of Satan. The hope is that the discipline will prove that he is a true believer in Jesus Christ. His repentance would be evidence that he is a genuine follower of Jesus Christ. The goal of discipline is not punishment but restoration. The goal is always restoration. Discipline is exercised for the highest good of the sinning saint. A disciplined brother is still a brother and is never to be despised, even when unrepentant (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). If he repents, he is to be forgiven and restored in love (Galatians 6:1-2).

I can hear someone ask, “Do we have to do this? It seems so painful?” Surgery is painful but it is the most merciful thing can be done for someone who needs it. Yes, discipline is painful, both for the sinning saint and the local church. But the pain may be necessary for a healthy life. Sometimes we think that life would be so much more beautiful without pain, but that is not true. If we could not feel pain, we could easily damage our bodies permanently. Without pain we might not detect a serious illness. We could cut ourselves and bleed to death before we even realized it. Pain is necessary. It is an essential element to robust physical health.

Discipline may be necessary for the robust spiritual health of the local church. It is how God wants us to deal with blatant sin in the church. If we want to be obedient and faithful to the Word of God that we say we believe, then church discipline must be our practice. In fact, Paul gives us three reasons right here in our text for our life application—three reasons why church discipline is so essential.

## LIFE APPLICATION

(6-8)

### 1. A little sin affects the whole church.

Verse 6 – *Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?* He is basically saying, “Don’t you know that one rotten apple can spoil the whole barrel?” *Leaven* throughout Scripture represents influence. Usually it refers to sinful or evil influence. The whole lump of dough represents the church. If given an opportunity, sin will permeate a whole church just as leaven permeates a whole loaf of bread. Jesus warned of the leaven of scribes and Pharisees which was hypocrisy. He warned of the leaven of the Sadducees which was rationalism—the denial of the supernatural. He warned against the leaven of Herod which

was self-indulgence and worldliness. Paul warned of the leaven of salvation by works—thinking that you can earn God’s salvation. Whenever sin is not repented of and cleansed, it increases and spreads its infection and corrupts the whole church. If sin is tolerated then the message is that lifestyle is acceptable and everyone has permission of follow suit. First reason for church discipline is that a little sin can affect the whole church. There is a second reason we must practice church discipline.

## **2. Purity is more consistent with our position in Christ.**

Verse 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.* It is Jewish orthodox custom to search the house remove all traces of leaven from the home before Passover, which is followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. There was to be no yeast, no leaven in their house. The housewife uses special utensils which have had no contact with leaven to cook for Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. That is how serious they are about it. That is how serious God wants us to be about dealing with sin in the church. Clean out the leaven of sin. Why? So you can be unleavened? No, the text says because you are unleavened. What does that mean? Getting rid of sin is consistent with our position in Jesus Christ. Do we get rid of sin so we can become saints? No. We get rid of sin because we are saints in Christ Jesus. God views us as holy in Christ Jesus. We are set apart ones in Christ. Sin does not consistent with our position in Christ. He wants us to be in our daily practice what we are in our eternal position. It is the ART OF LIVING LIKE SAINTS. That is the theme of this Book.

God is concerned that we live holy lives. Removing sin from our lives is the only possible way to be consistent with our position in Christ as saints. Neglecting to remove sin from our midst demeans the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul adds: *For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.* It is impossible to be occupied with the truth of Christ and Him crucified and be occupied with sin at the same time. When we wink at open blatant sin we degrade the importance of Christ’s sacrifice for our sin.

Reason number one: A little sin affects the whole church. Reason number two: Purity is more consistent with our position in Christ Jesus. Reason number three:

## **3. Purity makes the Christian life a continual festival of joy.**

Verse 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. Let us celebrate the feast.* What feast is he talking about? He is talking about living our lives as a celebration of our salvation in Christ, our position in Christ, and our eternal home in Christ. Just as the Feast of Unleavened Bread followed Passover, our Christian lives following the death of our Passover Lamb is to be characterized by an increasing victory over sin. That is why Jesus died. He died not only to deliver us from sin’s penalty but also from sin’s power.

God wants us to live out His Word in the power of His Spirit with increasing victory over sin. He names two sins here: *leaven of malice and wickedness*, which just about covers everything. Malice is the vicious disposition and wickedness is the active exercise of it. But controlled by Spirit of God we are to replace *the leaven of malice and wickedness* with *the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*. *Sincerity* is being pure in our motives – possessing integrity – which results from *truth* becoming the overwhelming reality in our lives.

As you study those passages that mention the Feast of Unleavened Bread throughout the Old Testament, it is almost always accompanied by great joy. Why should cooking without leaven for a week bring great joy? The analogy here is living without sin brings great joy. We miss that in the Christian life sometimes—that living apart from sin is living with real joy. We often get it backwards. We think sin is fun and holiness is a drag. That is not the way it is at all. Go ask a prostitute if sin is fun. She would probably tell you that it is bondage, not fun. Go ask a hardened drug addict or alcoholic if sin is fun. He will tell you it is bondage, not fun. The longer we live in sin, and the more deeply we become involved in it, and the more it has a grip on our life, the more depressing it is—the more miserable we get. You want the joy of the Lord in your life; it will come with victory over sin. Discipline helps people get victory over sin so their life can be one continual celebration of joy.

Churches that put their head in the sand and allow blatant and flagrant sin to continue become dull, lifeless, and powerless. Churches where the Word of God is faithfully applied become alive with new joy, excitement and power. That is what God wants for Woods Chapel. It means that God wants us to get serious about sin so He can bless us with joy and great power.