
Why is Immorality Tolerated?

1 Corinthians 5:1-13⁷

Russ Kennedy

IMPORTANT NOTE: Some of this manuscript was revised after it was preached in order to clarify the text. This clarification will also be taught in the following sermon in the series and will also appear in that manuscript. The audio has not been edited. Pastor Russ Kennedy

Living as a Christian in a sex obsessed culture...

The culture in Corinth...

For example, in Corinth the priestesses of the temple to Aphrodite were sacred prostitutes. Immorality, adultery and homosexuality were common, accepted and even extolled.

The culture we live in...

Our culture, like most pagan cultures, has become besotted with sex. It pervades our media, internet, and advertising. Immorality, adultery, homosexuality, trans-gender issues pervade our news and entertainment.

The challenges for the church.

Consider this example:

Amongst [some] Christians there is a rather different obstacle: they think that, rather than showing any condemnation and judgment on immoral behaviour, the church ought to express understanding of the pressures inherent in living in today's world, by not holding firm to any moral absolutes of the kind spelt out in the New Testament. In one local church, a married man (latterly divorced) had been living with a woman for over four years, while serving in leadership in their local church in very public ways and with the full acceptance of their pastor. They decided to get married, requested permission for the union to be blessed in the context of the regular weekly Communion service of the church, and invited their friends and family to join them in thus celebrating their marriage. What does such an action say to the unbelieving community about what it means to be Christian? [David Prior, p. 74. Adapted]

The history of the church shows that strong temptation in sexual matters is one of Satan's most frequent tactics in attempting to quench spiritual vitality.

What does the Christian life look like in such a culture?

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How does the church respond to those who fall into sin?

How does the church deal with those who won't repent of sin?

How does the church understand what the Bible says about church discipline?

How do Christians respond to Christians who live in sin and whose church will not or does not deal with them?

To help us stay true to the text, we need to see the structure of the text.

- A Remove the person (v. 1-2)**
 - B The Corporate Responsibility (v. 3-5)**
- C Covenant Community around the Passover Lamb (v. 6-8)**
 - B Individual Responsibility (v. 9-11)**
- A Remove the person (v. 12-13)**

This chapter then is about the failure of the church at Corinth to deal with sin through church discipline.

The Refusal of the Church (v. 1-2)

There was a terrible sin tolerated in the Corinthian church.

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

The Depth of the Sin (v. 1a)

Paul had received a report that there was undealt with sin in the church. There was open immorality. And it was of such a terrible nature that not even the pagans would tolerate it. Yet, the church is tolerating it. The church that so prided itself on its spirituality and giftedness is tolerating such an egregious sin.

The Description of the Sin (v. 1b)

There was a member of the church who was committing sexual immorality with his father's wife. Why does Paul refer to the woman as "his father's wife"? Is this his mother? Or is this a step-mother? Is this man married to his father's former wife, as some commentators say? If this last thing, how in world is that even a sin, much less something even the pagans won't do? It seems to me that it is simplest to say that there was a man in the church who was committing incest with either his mother or his step-mother. Whatever the real nature of the sin was, Paul saw it as a great evil and a blight on the church.

The Difficulty of the Sin (v. 2)

Due to pride, arrogance and indifference, the church has not removed this man. Now you have to stop and ask, "What are they proud of? What are they arrogant against?" Why is the correct response, "mourning"? Is it possible that they are proud of the fact that they are open minded to this sinning person? They are proud of their tolerance. Dare I say, they may have been proud that they are the kind of church where this kind of sin is actually, well, OK. What Paul calls them to is sadness, brokenness, grief.

What concerns Paul at present is the lack of concern amongst the Christians at Corinth about the implications of what is happening. Indeed, he seems less bothered about the immorality itself than about the blasé, arrogant attitude being displayed towards it. As we will find out, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Over the next 4 chapters Paul is going to bring forward charge after charge indicting the church for sin after sin. He dismantles their vain, self-important stance of fake spirituality. He has already blown up their leadership in its infant carnality fracturing the church. Now he is indicting the leadership and the church for a kind of arrogance that permits them to tolerate, allow, countenance a sin that even the pagans would throw up at.

Now, this ought to cause us to stop and examine ourselves. We are not responsible for all the religious clubs around us that pretend to be churches and have no church discipline. That they are vulnerable to the charges in this text is without question. However, we are responsible for the Chapel.

What is our reaction to unrepentant sin by our members? Are we grieved, saddened, broken? Does our response look like mourning?

Do we discipline as we ought? Do we deal with unrepentant sin? Are we too tolerant? When does longsuffering become simply become indifference?

How do we carefully, Biblically, humbly deal with sin?

It is a weighty matter to do church discipline. We must be humble, careful, obedient, ever attentive to the work of God in the hearts and actions of people claiming the name of Christ. We must also be enabled by the grace and Spirit of the Lord to deal with unrepentant sin. We have a Biblical command and Biblical process to follow. We have committed ourselves to do so. May God help us to be pleasing to Him in this of most difficult responsibilities in the church.

The Responsibility of the Church (v. 2b-5)

Paul orders the church to resolve this issue at the gathering of the church.

Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

The Biblical Absolute (v. 2b)

Paul commands the removal of the sinning person. There is no question, no equivocation, no argument. He has not repented. He has continued in his sin. He is to be removed from the church. The man's sin and unrepentance is bad. But the church's failure to remove him is as well.

The common Christian term for this is called church discipline. This text and its command by Paul assumes more than is given here. This is not a manual on how to work through the process. This is a command to a church who has refused to do what it was supposed to do. Other texts give us guidelines on the process of discipline. While we do not know for sure, it seems reasonable that the church has followed what the Lord requires. Church discipline is to lead either to repentance or removal. Neither had happened in this case. Therefore, the strong words of the Apostle Paul, "Let him be removed..."

The Biblical Authority (v. 3-4)

He reminds them that the Lord has given this authority to the local church. The church is responsible to deal with those who will not repent of what is clearly sin.

That authority to judge sin in the church was first given to the apostles. The Lord gave them the keys of the kingdom to exercise authority over the churches (Matthew 16:19). That authority included discipline and was extended to the church itself (Matthew 18:15-20). When Paul says, "*Even though I am not with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. And as though I were there, I have already passed judgment on this man in the name of the Lord Jesus,*" [New Living Translation] he is speaking as an Apostle. His may not be with them physically, but he is with them spiritually, or in the Spirit. As God's designated ambassador, their father in the faith, the Apostle he has already passed judgment, that is, rendered a Biblically authorized decision regard this person. This is not unbiblical judging of the man's motives. This is a God-ordained, proper function of his office and the church. In the name, authority of Jesus, the Lord of church, he, Paul the apostle, has rendered an indictment against this man for his sin.

But the church must act. I want you to notice several things Paul says.

This must take place at a gathering, *a public meeting of the church*. It may be at a normal or special gathering of the church. But, it is not to be done in secret. This removal is to be done in the presence of the church body. Too refuse to do this is to fail to recognize the body of Christ, the members of the church.

This is to take place under *the Apostolic directives* – that is, for us, directed by the Scriptures which are the voice of the Lord through the Apostles to us. So the church is to be in submission, directed by and acting in accordance with the Scriptures which are to be "present" there. To refuse do this is to not be in submission to the Scriptures.

This is to be done with *the authority of Christ*. The word “power” here more likely means “authority”. It has two aspects.

The church is to act under the Lord’s authority. This means that they are to obey the Lord’s authority in their own lives as the church. Biblical church discipline is not an option. To not do this is to disobey the Lord and to resist His authority over the church.

The church is to act with the authority of the Lord. In other words, this decision is to be accepted and submitted to by the church. The Lord’s Word is being followed and the Lord’s power is being exercised. To not do this is to fail to recognize the God-given authority of the church.

This is to be settled action. There is no vote or affirmation by the church. The church membership is not taking the action. The leaders are in the presence of the church. Paul does not expect the membership to “approve or disapprove” the action. He simply expects that the action will take place. This seems to place the primary responsibility on the shoulders of the leaders, the elders. This would be aligned with other texts. This is the final step in church discipline. Whatever has gone before, this action is a declaration to the church. The person is removed. To refuse to do this is adding to the Scriptures and relocating the oversight of the church from the Elders to the membership.

The Biblical Action (v. 4-5)

What is to be done (v. 5a)? *You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

This guilty man is to be handed over to Satan. Any way you look at it, this is a fearsome statement. The unrepentant man is not simply removed from membership; he is handed over Satan. Brothers and sisters, there is a measure of spiritual protection that is provided within the church. Now it is important for me to say this: Do NOT think of church here as a facility or a legal entity incorporated in Ohio. The church this person is being removed from is the local, covenanted membership, the assembly. The church there was the assembly of Corinth. The church here is called the Clearcreek Chapel. But the person is being removed from the spiritual membership and fellowship of the local body of Christ. As such, they are outside the spiritual grace and guardianship of the church. There are only two kingdoms you can be in: in church and under Christ or in the world under Satan.

There is both warning and hope in this. It is related to why the church is to do it (v. 5b): All Satan can do is to harm the flesh, the physical. This is in accord with much in the Scripture. Think of Job in the Old Testament, Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts, or Hymenaeus and Alexander in Ephesus as related in 1 Timothy. So this turning him over to Satan may bring certain consequences in the person’s life in this world.

Once again, David Prior is so helpful in thinking about this. He writes:

It is hard to appreciate the extreme spiritual vulnerability created in a person, hitherto protected by and privileged within the community of God's people, once he has been excommunicated from such security. It is equivalent to being dropped, defenceless and disowned, in enemy-occupied territory. [Prior, p. 75].

This will hopefully bring him to repentance so that his spirit might be saved. Paul points to the usefulness of discipline. It is a means by which God grants repentance and strips away the powerful control of this world and the flesh. The church that is faithful in discipline is truly loving God and His people. It is hard. It is very sad when it has to happen. Nevertheless, it needs to be done for the good of the person so removed.

The Reasons for the Discipline (v. 5–8)

Why was the church's boast a problem?

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ 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. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

As a Means of Humility (v. 5a)

The church had been boasting about its high spirituality. Part of the boasting seems to be over their long-suffering toward sinning people in the church. Discipline reminds us of your need for Christ and continual deliverance from temptation. In other words, it humbles us.

As a Means of Repentance (v. 5)

To bring the offender back to God (This has already been seen — 5:5.) Discipline is not retribution. Discipline is not punishment. Discipline is meant to, by God's grace, bring repentance and restoration. The long term hope is the person will be saved on the day of the Lord.

As a Means of Purity (v. 6-7)

Drawing from their familiarity with the Jewish Passover, Paul reminds them of the tendency of sin to spread. Now this particular sin may not spread. But the church's own disobedient response to it is a part of the sins' leavening spread. And, the lack of discipline encourages others to go on sinning since there appears to be no immediate consequence.

Now we want to be careful here. Paul is saying, and very precisely so, that when the leaven of high-handed, unrepeated sin is removed, then we are in accordance with who we are. That does not make us more spiritual. Nor does it make us purer. It simply restores us to the condition in which we are. The removing of the leaven of a sinning person restores the church to its newness as a unleavened and new.

With powerful effect we are reminded that obedient church discipline does NOT give us a right standing with God. Being the new, unleavened lump is simply the work of God in the sacrifice of Christ. He is our Passover lamb. His saving work is the ONLY means by which we are made to be who we are.

This means that Christians and churches are to see their obedience as an effect of and the maintenance of their identity. They are who they are so behave like that.

This means that Christians will be obedient. There is a present, active command for Christians to avoid sin. There is a present, active command for churches to do discipline. Both of these require intentional, active, grace-dependent obedience.

As a Means of Celebration (v. 8)

This last statement is interesting. It has been loaded up with rules and regulations in regards to the Lord's table. It has been used as a justification for the celebration of Passover and Easter in the church. To do that is to miss Paul's point altogether.

He refers to keeping the festival. This is Old Testament language. This is the way Paul refers to the feasts and festivals of the Old Testament. He is connecting the Jewish Passover with the Lord's Table of the church. Paul is saying they are failing to recognize who they are as a covenant community. Israel's celebrating the Passover lamb was remembering that God had redeemed them out of Israel. It was a festival celebrating their becoming God's people.

So the church is to remove the sinning person so that their celebration of Christ, the Passover Lamb, is pure and true (v. 8). But even further. They must do so, not out of malice against the sinning person or with evil, sinful intent but rather with simple honesty and truth. If the leaders come to this meeting with malice and sin in their hearts against the sinning person, then they are also leavening the pure lump.

Paul is also beginning to build his case against the church for their displeasing way at the Lord's table. They are willing to include this sinning person at the Lord's Table; but they unwilling to wait for the lower class of people to share in the table together.

Further, as one writer put it, "It is in this atmosphere of openness, sincerity, truthfulness and integrity that our sins and failures can be properly dealt with in the body of Christ, not in a spirit of judgmentalism, but openly, courageously and with consistency. It is transparency of this kind that makes the Christian community distinctive." [Prior, p. 79].

The Resolution for the Church (v. 9–13)

Now, this final paragraph on the surface deals with a misunderstanding by the church and at the same time, gives us guidance in situations we sometimes find ourselves in.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

The Concern (v. 9-10)

Paul had written an earlier letter to the church at Corinth that is not a part of Scripture. It is referred to here and in a couple of other places as well. What he is dealing with here he had already addressed with them. He had warned them not to associate with immoral people. They took Paul’s earlier command to mean that they cannot associate with any sexually immoral people. Paul responds by showing how foolish and immature they are. Of course he didn’t mean unbelievers – he only meant people who kept on sinning and claimed to be Christians. Otherwise, a Christian would have to have no association with lost people at all and that would end evangelism.

So Paul is pushing back against certain kinds of separationism, isolationism and pietism. The church is to live in and engage with the world. But the church is to be distinct from the world. But the sins of the world are not to be overlooked and tolerated within the church. So the church goes out into the world of sin. But the sin of the world should not be coming into the church. Now, again, let me remind you that these are not in the area of liberty and preference. They are always sin; that is, relating to the clear, unambiguous precepts from the Scriptures which apply to us.

So, we can summarize what Paul is saying this way: we must have Biblical discipline and disassociation within the church and we can have free association with those outside the church.

The Correction (v. 11)

Notice the list of sins in verses 10-11.

¹¹ I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don’t even eat with such people. [NLT]

They are stunning. Immorality, idolatry, drunkenness, swindling, abusers or revilers—these we understand as major category sins. Paul also puts in greed in this list. Greed? You mean we are not to associate with Christians who are greedy? Is this also in our major sins list?

So why this list? It seems to me that Paul is not necessarily giving a major crimes list, but rather is addressing *the sins that were going on in the church*. It seems to me that Paul's sins lists are illustrative, never exhaustive. Paul is saying this is what is going on around the church and some and maybe all of it is going on in the church. That is not to say that these are not sins. Nor should we elevate these to some class of "super-sins". But the tendency in the church has been to classify sins in such a way that the common ones we do, a la "greed" don't get addressed. Whatever Paul is commanding here, he is commanding about those who persist in unrepentant immorality, idolatry, financial mismanagement and theft, abusing people, speaking badly about leadership (reviling), excessive drinking and greed. Since this is an illustrative list, I think that what Paul commands here is covering any sin clearly forbidden by the Scriptures. Many texts indicate the same response but over different sins, laziness and not being willing to work being one of them.

A couple of these sins beg some explanation:

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Swindling | The idea here was of using lies, deceit, dishonest communication in order to make financial gain. We usually think in terms of criminal behavior. But that standard is too low. This word was used of people hawkers and street sellers in the market place. Christians who run businesses and work in media, marketing and sales need to pay close attention to this text. How often do Christians habitually misrepresent their church, their personal needs, their products and services in order to get people to give or get people to buy. |
| Idolatry | This word normally is used to label the worship of false gods. Our culture's false gods are not so much external physical representations of deities, but are the deification of cultural ideas, philosophies and principles. We may well see a day where people will be saved at the Chapel who will struggle with turning away from false idols. I am familiar with this as a common struggle in Africa and India. |
| Reviling, abusing | This word primarily was used to refer to speak evilly of or against authorities. It may be in the context of home and applied to wives and children. It may in the context of culture and applied to authorities in our culture such as police or local and national leaders. It also is in the context of the church and was applied to people speaking falsely or evilly about the leadership of the church. |
| Greed | This word was often translated covetousness. While it is often a sin of the heart and sometimes carefully concealed, the church should address it when it is open and plain in people's lives. Paul is not here merely addressing those who are rich, but any whose |

desire for what is not theirs has mastered and controlled them. Greed is an often unaddressed sin in the church.

So, what does Paul require the believers in Corinth and at the Chapel to do? In what case are we to do this? How does this command fit into normative church discipline?

First, the church should be dealing with people who keep on sinning without repentance. This is to be done in accordance with the Bible. At the Chapel, we have clearly declared what we do and why in our Book of Faith and Order. Church discipline usually occurs here after the sinning person has been counseled by the counseling ministry and confronted by their shepherd and by the Elders.

Second, once a person has been disciplined, we are not have any association with them as Christians, including not having meals with them as Christians. They have been removed and are going on in their sin, yet they continue to claim to be brothers in Christ. While it may be hard, it is what Paul calls us to do.

However, there are situations where a person is claiming to be a Christian and:

- (a) the person withdraws their membership before or during discipline and continues on sinning; or
- (b) the person is a member of no church or of a church where there is no Biblically dealing with the person who is sinning.

In those situations, Christians are not to associate with these believers, not to even have a meal with them. Individual Christians may not do private discipline. But an individual Christian must not have fellowship with a person who claims to be a Christian and is clearly and openly sinning. We must at least consider this in these areas that mattered to Paul in the church at Corinth: sex, money, possessions, drink and the tongue.

Now, this is not the only text that speaks to this. The wife of a disobedient spouse is given clear instruction in 1 Peter 3 on how to respond to her husband. The instructions here would apply to Christian's fellowship with other Christians as though sin were not an issue. The instruction Peter gave would have the same effect that is desired here. Hopefully, through the Biblical response, the sinning person will come to repentance.

So, the response of discipline and disassociation are for those who claim to be Christians but continue to live in open sin.

The Command (v. 12-13)

Church discipline is not new in the New Testament. It is consistent with the teaching in the Old Testament.

¹² It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. ¹³ God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you." [NLT]

There is no contradiction between Paul's firm insistence on the need for discipline over blatant and continuous sin in the church, and Jesus' injunction that we should not judge one another. Paul's command preserves our Christian distinctiveness. The Lord's command promotes it. We need, therefore, to apply our capacity for judging, not to outsiders who are God's responsibility. Nor are we to use it on our brothers and sisters in Christ who are walking in holiness and repenting of their sins. But we are to judge anyone who *claims to be a Christian* (11) but is continuing to sin by violating basic Christian standards. Those who continue in sin are scandalizing the community of believers, evacuating the gospel of its power, handing over important territory to enemies of God, and robbing the Lord of his glory.

Paul's last instruction is quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. The command is used in six different occasions: when a false prophet instructs the people of God to follow other gods (13:5); when a man or a woman has begun to serve other gods (17:7); when a man is caught stealing (24:7); when a woman who is given to be married says she is a virgin when she is not (22:21); when a man forces 'a betrothed virgin' to lie with him in a situation where she should have called for help (22:24); and when any person has maliciously brought false witness against another (19:19). Whether it is a matter of idolatry or immorality, the command of God is the same: 'purge the evil from the midst of you'. In the Old Testament this means the death of the guilty person. There is a remarkable parallel between the sins mentioned in Deuteronomy and 1 Corinthians 5:11. In both the Old and New Testament economies, God requires a similarly firm discipline. [Adapted from Prior, p. 84-85].

Reflect and Respond

So what do we learn from Paul's stern words to the church at Corinth?

The church is not to withdraw from the culture due to its sin, but is to stay engaged in it for the sake of the gospel.

The church is to deal with Christians who continue to sin and will not repent. There is a Biblical process outlined in the Scripture that we call church discipline. While we do not want to be quick to discipline, we also do not want to be hesitant and slow when warranted.

The church is to remove those who are members who will not repent of their sins. Excommunication is a sad but needed step that has been authorized by the Lord.

Christians are not to associate with those who have been Biblically disciplined. We are not to treat them as though they are Christians who have lost their church membership. We are not to fellowship with them as Christians, not even to taking a meal with them.

When a person claiming to be a Christian will not repent of and continues on sinning and is not dealt with Biblically, then Christians are to not associate and not to fellowship with them.

We should carefully examine our own lives. Are we casual about sin? Do we treat our own sins lightly while being harsh and hard on the sins of others?

Have we functionally withdrawn from the world? Do you have unbelievers you are engaged with in the world? Is there anyone in your life to whom you can give the gospel?

A text like this must end with an exhortation to all of us to be pleasing to the Lord. We obey the Lord. We must walk in wisdom. May God grant us the faith and grace that we need.