

Prayers

To God

Pray with gratitude about the wonderful detail of God's blessings, for He knows you through and through. Pray that He will lead you into His pathways, and that you will remain in His love forever.

For myself

Weekly theme: generosity

Pray for those close to you, so pray that you will be able to remain close to them; generous in love, generous in compassion, generous in all blessings and all giving.

For others

Father God, your Word speaks into this world with unswerving faithfulness and commitment. Come to us once again to break the power of evil, to shine truth into injustice, to be gracious to the unlovely, to challenge what is untrue. Father God, reveal Your Word, and bring salvation to those who still do not even know about You; I praise You Father God for Your commitment and Your faithfulness: AMEN

Meditation

Lord God, You are a worker of miracles.

The miracle of grace that opens people's hearts,
And by Your Spirit, reveals the truth of Your Word.

The miracle of hope that reveals eternal truth
And a God with a love so powerful it can save us.

The miracle of healing that cures the body,
Showing the world You care for all Your creation.

The miracle of wholeness that heals the soul,
In which the Spirit breathes new life into tired lives.

The miracle of love that brings true happiness,
To those who place their trust in the love of Christ.

The miracle of faith by which we find peace
To love and worship until our Lord returns in glory!

Lord God, You are a worker of miracles!

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, of a kind that is not even found among pagans; a man has married his father's wife! ² And are you proud? Shouldn't you rather be distressed, and should the man who has done this not be removed from among you? ³ For even

though I am not present physically I am with you in spirit, and I have already judged the man who has done this thing, as if I were with you. ⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled together with my spirit, and in the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵ hand this very man over to Satan for the destruction of the sinful nature, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord!

⁶ The reason for your boasting is not good. Surely you know that a small amount of yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise? ⁷ Clear out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch of dough, for really, you are without yeast because Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us celebrate the festival not with the old yeast and not with the yeast of evil and wickedness, but with unleavened sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote you a letter to tell you not to be closely associated with sexually immoral people; ¹⁰ but not meaning the sexually immoral of the world who are greedy, grasping and idolatrous. That would mean you have to withdraw from this world! ¹¹ So I must now place on record for you that you must not associate with someone who is called a fellow believer but who is also sexually immoral or covetous, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.

¹² What have I to do with judging outsiders? Should you not judge those who are inside the church?

¹³ God will judge those who are outside; but you must remove the evil one from amongst you.

Review

After the great treasures of the earlier parts of 1 Corinthians, we can be in no doubt that things have now moved on. Paul is no longer speaking about the glories of the Gospel and the message of Christ crucified. Here in this passage, he begins to deal with some of the critical sins lying at the heart of this Christian community, and as he begins to be frank about the details, the accusations the church has launched at Paul, their founder, seem like pious platitudes. Here in this chapter we learn of a dire sin that has rocked the church and not been dealt with properly. He attacks now with considerable force!

In chapter 5, Paul exposes what was probably the most scandalous of the sins reported to him, that of devious sexual immorality. But before we go any further and become judgemental ourselves, we must immediately recognise that the devil has promoted this sin and related sins within the church for centuries. As I write, more than one international church is struggling with secular claims against it of proved sexual abuse amongst its ministers; we are scandalised now, just as Paul was scandalised by what had been reported to him.

Being shocked at sin; but what sin exactly?

There is an obvious sense of shock in Paul's voice as he addresses the problem, '*it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, of a kind that is not even found among pagans ...*' (5:1). We can hardly believe what we are reading; what does it mean when Paul says, '*a man has married his father's wife*'? What on earth would possess a Christian man to do such a thing, or Christian married woman to be tempted into this? Now, the rest of this chapter contains Paul's stern comments on this awful sin, but how awful was it? Had the church not dealt with it properly because this was the sort of thing that was common in those days, not exactly approved of in society, but tolerated is that no one actually talked about it or challenged it? I submit that this was indeed a case of Christians living by pagan standards without appreciating the moral truths of the Gospel. And if this was so, and if the church was not doing anything about it, what was going on?

Now if this was simply a case of pagan morality slipping into the church, then Paul would not have been so concerned; he would perhaps have warned against it and moved on, expecting the church leadership to deal with it once so warned. But if we look carefully, what was happening here was subtly different. From some of the earliest writings about the Christian church, and from some passages in Paul's writing in general, we know that some who received the Gospel took it as a form of license to do exactly what they wanted. Others believed that if good came from the evil of the Cross, they should do more evil so that more good would come to them by God's grace; some people said what is reported by Paul in Romans, '*let us do evil so that good may result*' (Romans 3:8). With the Gospel sounding more like a license to do anything, some created an ideology of 'free love', a surprisingly modern idea, we think, but also very old! People have always thought they can do whatever they want providing no one is 'hurt'; it sounds wonderful, that is, until someone is indeed hurt by the actions of another, and it will happen.

Dealing with sin - and saving the sinner

Paul's ire was roused because this sexual immorality was known about by the leadership of the Corinthian church, and nothing had been done. We do not know whether the leadership was paralysed because those involved were too important to confront, or it did not act because it could not decide how to handle the situation. Whatever the scenario, Paul was determined to deal with this issue, but he did so in a startling and dramatic manner.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this passage comes in verse five, where Paul, having pronounced judgement on the man who had committed this sin, says he will hand him '*over to Satan for the destruction of the sinful nature, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord!*' We do not often hear such storing language even Scripture! This sounds somewhat damning, but we should be careful not to dismiss Paul's comment. In saying this, he seeks the destruction of the man's '*sinful nature*' so he might find eternal salvation (5:5). This is not a way of getting out of what might seem a straightforward example of Paul's over-reaction. However, Paul was not prone to be less than exact in dealing with such matters, and I believe that in his forthright language this is exactly what he was wanting to do. He wanted the sin to 'go to hell' so that the man might one day have the proper and godly chance to be saved.

The example of yeast

As we continue to read on, Paul now reflects on the nature of sin within the church, and how to handle it. Verses 6 to 8 are a simple illustration, typical of the Bible, in which yeast represents sin, hence the significance of 'unleavened bread'. Just as Israel was required to '*clear out the old yeast*' before being delivered by God from Egypt (Exodus 12), so the Christian receives salvation through the sacrifice of Christ which removes all sin, and the symbolism of the Passover means that the '*yeast*' must be removed (5:7).

Paul's point is this; if Christ has removed sin through our salvation, what right have we to return to allow it to return. Sin comes into the human condition by permission of the human soul (Genesis 3), so the Christian bears a responsibility to stand against sin in all its forms. For this, we have the law of the Old Testament to guide us, being the expression of the righteousness of God; it does not save us from sin, but the law certainly warns us against the errors of the human condition by which we allow sin its place within. Paul's battle is against the prevailing attitudes within a church which give people permission to think they can sin again; he fights against the devil's primary route back into people's lives after they have been saved.

A misunderstanding corrected

Apparently, Paul had written an earlier letter to Corinth (5:9), which contained a warning that sexual immorality was to be avoided, but there were misunderstandings over what Paul had said. The church had interpreted this earlier letter as a call for them to stay away from sinners who were outside of the church, and Paul was aghast. The job of a Christian was expressly to follow Jesus by taking the Gospel to sinners in the world at large so they may hopefully be saved, not to keep away from them! So here in this letter, Paul had to clarify his comments, and he does this in verse 11. He explains that his intent was to inform the Corinthians that the sin of sexual immorality was unacceptable precisely within the church; '*I must now place no record that you must not associate with someone who is called a believer but who is also sexually immoral ...*' (5:11). He was appalled at what had now happened as sexual sin was tolerated within the church; probably the more so because his earlier words were thought of as allowing such a thing.

Judging the world - judging the church

So where does this leave the Corinthian church and us? In the last verses of this passage, Paul makes an important point both for the Christians in Corinth and for us. God's people must '*judge*' their own fellowship, but not the world in which they are set; '*God will judge those who are outside; but you must remove the evil one from among you.*' (5:13). The responsibilities of the church are therefore clear; Christians must exercise godly judgement within the fellowship about any sin or evil found and clearly evidenced. However, they must stand back from being judgemental about people in the world. If God's people spend their time criticising the people of the world they will quickly find that no one will want to hear what they have to say, even about their message of salvation. To be frank, this is where we are right now in the life of the worldwide church; few are interested in our message of liberty because they feel condemned by us.

Discipleship

Application

Sexual sin within the church

Paul touches on a difficult subject here, because in every generation, sexual sin is a powerful tool in the hands of satan, and its evils pervades society and sometimes the church. In our own day, some young people of Christian background think it right to sleep together before marriage, an issue some would say is debatable, but is by all accounts taboo within the Bible. So does a Christian pastor ignore this problem or confront it? Our passage indicates that it is best to confront such things openly and directly, so that all know what God expects in terms of acceptable sexual practice.

Keeping to pure

The general message of this passage is that to remain pure before God, especially in sexual matters, it is wise to keep close to the standards of Scripture, which are not just revealed in the laws of Leviticus (Lev 18,19), but also through the great stories of the Bible, in this instance, within books such as Genesis, Ruth, and the Song of Solomon. These scriptures speak of a purity of sexual relationships which is wholesome, and specifically within marriage. This must remain our norm.

The church must also be both clear in its teaching and willing to act to protect its stance when people stray from the moral pathway. It must always offer the repentant sinner an avenue back to God, but it cannot afford to turn a blind eye to sin within the fellowship of believers. The devil will always try to hide as much sin as possible within the church, and good Christian leaders will do their best both to expose it and also to help people understand both the importance of God's moral order and the way to find forgiveness when this is broken. As we will soon find out in 1 Corinthians, sex is just the beginning of the church's problems!

Ideas for what to do

- *Sexual practice is a complex issue, and we must all examine our souls concerning sexual sin and how it affects our life. Some sexual practices are not written about in scripture and people are justly concerned about them. If you are worried about such things, identify someone in church with whom you can discuss this. Do this to find liberation both from sin and guilt.*
- *Pray for church leaders who sometimes have to deal with decisions about people's lives as a consequence of sin that must be dealt with. Some such matters are not easy to handle and require great care.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about sexual sin and how to deal with it in the church?*
2. *How can we best ensure that sexual sin is not covered up within the church, or practiced covertly against the advice of leadership?*
3. *What does Paul mean by the duty of God's people to 'judge' each other within the church? Why does Paul insist that we do not judge those outside the church?*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, keep us pure and free from sin. So when we find fail to understand what sin really is, lead us by Your Holy Spirit to understand the moral truth, and receive our repentance. In understanding the true nature of sin, we do not want to be found wanting. Lead us into all truth, Lord Jesus, and guide us into our eternal home. **AMEN**