

The Joy of Being Different

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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When we started this series on 1 Corinthians, one of the things I stressed was that throughout the letter St. Paul's focus is on the cross of Christ. The problem in Corinth was that the people in the church there had taken their eyes off the cross and the result was a blurring of the lines that are supposed to separate the world and the Church and between the unbeliever and the believer. Regardless of what other repercussions might come from losing sight of the cross, the most important was that the Church failed to be what it was supposed to be. The people lost their joy in Christ and when they lost that they lost their witness to the world. It started with them abandoning the Gospel they had been taught by Paul and instead favouring teachers whose style, and possibly even teaching, fit better with the worldly Greek philosophy that was so popular in their culture.

And of course that problem never went away. Preachers that sound more like Oprah and Dr. Phil often draw a bigger crowd than those who actually preach the cross of Christ. But the problem went further. I want to look at Chapter 5 this morning. The Greco-Roman culture of Corinth was infiltrating the church in other ways too. Look at verse 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.

Sexual immorality was a place where the early Christians, just like Christians today, had some real struggles. Sex was everywhere in the Greco-Roman world. Consider that most of the ancient pagan religions started out as the worship of fertility gods and goddesses, and even as those religions became more sophisticated, sex was still a big part of them. Corinth was a major centre of the worship of Aphrodite and the temple there is said to have had a thousand priestesses who were also prostitutes. Sexually

explicit imagery was used to decorate everything from dining room walls to mile-markers on the highways. The idea of marital fidelity was laughable in most of the Greco-Roman culture too. People were being called out of that culture as they came to Christ, but they often struggled to leave behind their sinful cultural baggage. As unbelievers we work hard at developing our sinful habits and they aren't always easy to break when we come to the cross.

And yet as bad as the Greco-Roman norm was, the problem in the Corinthian church went beyond even that. One of the men in the church was in an incestuous relationship with his step-mother – something that even the unbelieving Corinthians knew was wrong! We can tell that it wasn't just the church turning a blind eye on this guy's sin – the congregation was actually proud of his being there. Paul goes on in verse 2:

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

We can't tell from the text what their justification was for tolerating this man's sin, but we do know that where other Churches, like those in Galatia, struggled with legalism, the Corinthians had the opposite problem and that's probably what was going on here. They were abusing their *freedom* in Christ to the point that anything and everything was okay. It's possible they just decided to accept this sin as okay. Or maybe they took the position that transitioning from the world into the Church is a hard thing for a new convert and they were just hoping that eventually the Spirit would convict this guy and get him straightened out. But in the end it doesn't really matter why. Paul condemns them because their response to sin is the *opposite* of what it should be. They were proud that they were tolerating it and when, Paul says, they actually should have been mourning it. Sin is never something to be proud of. It's something we mourn in ourselves and it's something that the Church grieves over when it's found in our brothers and sisters. Paul says, "Don't tolerate this kind of sin. Not even the pagans tolerate it! You need to remove this guy!" He goes on in verse 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. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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.

Paul gives his apostolic judgement: "deliver this man to Satan." Throw him out. Why? The first reason he gives is for the benefit of the man himself. If we tolerate the gross sin of a brother or sister, we're not doing them any favours – in fact we may be giving them false assurance of salvation. Jesus stressed over and over that if we are truly grafted into him by the Spirit, we *will* show new life. He's the vine. We're dead wood. But when the Spirit unites us to Christ we're brought to life. We change. And the evidence is that we become like the vine – like Christ – and we bear the fruit of the Spirit. And a part of that fruit is repentance. It doesn't mean we become perfectly sinless, but it does mean that we develop a desire to please God and that we mourn our sins and the sins of others.

And so when we see a brother or sister who isn't bearing fruit – and especially when they're bearing rotten fruit like this guy sleeping with his step-mother and being totally unrepentant – basically when we see someone who claims to be a Christian showing by his actions that that he's not a Christian – the most loving thing we can do for him is to remove him from the Church and return him to the world. Again, why? I know it may not fit with the thinking of modern Evangelicalism, but it really is about evangelism – it's about our mission as the Church to make new disciples. Paul says, remove him "that his spirit may be saved." It's meant to serve as a wake-up call. If he really is a Christian, being removed from Christian fellowship ought to be the thing that prompts him to get his life in order – and when he does that and shows repentance, he's welcome to return to fellowship. *But* it may well be that he's not a Christian. Scripture teaches us over and over that if you're truly a Christian you'll show it. If someone isn't showing it, we need to realise that it's a very real possibility that it's because the person isn't a Christian. Maybe they never truly understood the Gospel. Maybe they think that because they've been baptised or have been in church all their lives, that that makes them a Christian. Someone like that needs to be taken back to square one

so that he can be evangelised and come to a point of really understanding the Gospel and giving his life to Christ. But to do nothing – to allow him to continue in Christian fellowship and to continue to come to the Lord’s Table to receive Communion, is to give him a *false* assurance. It’s like being the prophets who said to Israel, “Peace, peace,” when in reality they were not at peace with God. Again, it’s giving a person false assurance, and that’s dangerous and spiritually deadly. So first, this kind of excommunication is for the benefit of the individual – that they might die to the flesh (because they obviously haven’t done that yet) and be pointed back to Christ by the Church.

But Paul’s main focus here is on the second reason for excommunication. The individual needs the wake-up call, but first and foremost it’s for the purity and witness of the Church. Look at verses 6-8:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 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. 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.

Paul takes these people back to the Jewish Passover Feast. That was the once-yearly remembrance of God’s having delivered his people out of their bondage in Egypt. They were told to sacrifice and eat a lamb, and then to paint its blood on the doorframe of their house as a sign to the angel of death to “pass over.” They were also told to eat unleavened bread – in fact leaven was specifically forbidden, so it became the tradition to purge the house of any kind of leaven as part of the preparation for Passover.

You see, in the Old Testament (and it carries over into the New) leaven always represents evil. And it makes sense from an ancient perspective. You couldn’t go to the store and buy yeast like you can today. For that reason *unleavened* bread was popular. But when you did make leavened bread, you’d have to save a lump of dough. The next time you made bread, you’d knead that left-over lump into the

new batch, again saving a piece that you’d knead into another and another and another. But if you went too long, that leaven became a health risk, because you were basically using rotten dough as leavening and the longer you passed along that little piece, the more rotten it became.

Sin does the same thing in the Body of Christ if we don’t deal with it. Instead of using Paul’s talk about leaven, we’d say, “One bad apple spoils the whole barrel.” Either way it’s a reality. When we are united with Jesus Christ he gives us new life. As I said, the Spirit takes dead wood, grafts it into Christ, and brings it to life. Through Christ the “malice and evil” that characterise the unbeliever are purged from us and replaced with “sincerity and truth.” It’s like the Passover. The leaven of sin is purged by the sacrifice of Jesus. He makes us a fresh lump of dough, to use Paul’s analogy. The problem is that as we continue to struggle with sin, its leaven keeps getting into the dough. Life in Christ is an ongoing thing and we need to continue to rely on his cleansing power.

But it goes beyond the individual level; the same principle carries over to the Church. We’ve come together precisely because we’ve each been purified by Christ and given new life. But sin comes in and adds that bad leaven. If it’s allowed to grow unchecked, it eventually destroys the whole loaf.

Unchecked sin in the body undermines who we are. Remember I started this series reading from Chapter 6. Paul listed a bunch of sins and then he said, “And such *were* some of you. *But* you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” A changed life is our number one witness to the world of just what it is that God does for us through Jesus Christ. But what happens to that witness if we keep living as idolaters, sexually immoral, greedy, drunkards, and revilers? The only difference between the world and the church at that point is that most of the people in the world are at least honest about their sin. But the church becomes hypocritical – claiming not to be sinners, when in fact they continue sinning. Worse yet, self-righteousness goes right along with that hypocrisy. We turn a blind eye on our sins so that we can tolerate and live with them, but all the while we point our

fingers at people in the world and condemn them for their sins. As sin spreads in the Body, this is exactly how it destroys our witness to Christ. We lose sight of the cross and fall into self-righteousness – and as we do that we lose the joy of new life in Christ.

For nineteen hundred years the Church was pretty faithful in doing what St. Paul says here, but between some churches abusing discipline and worldly pressure to conform to a culture where anything goes, we’re now at a point where there’s virtually no accountability in the wider Church. And in the end the Church as a whole is the poorer for it. We now have churches where anything goes and when a church does follow the demands of Scripture, there are plenty of other churches in town that don’t and will happily receive those under discipline, no questions asked. And lately it seems that more and more pastors and churches as refuse and even ridicule what Paul is telling us to do here.

And we wonder why the contemporary Western Church has become so ineffective in ministry and evangelism. We’ve taken to picking and choosing from Scripture. We’ll do this, but we won’t do that and in the end we have a Church that looks an awful lot like the world. And because of that we’ve lost the joy of life in Christ. We replace it with legalism or with a weekly seeking after superficial emotional experiences. Instead, we ought to be doing what Scripture tells us to do. If we’re faithful in holding our brothers and sisters accountable, St. Paul says that we can and will truly *celebrate* in Jesus Christ – in our Passover lamb. The Church can be what it has truly been made by Christ and can begin to live out its new life while the world looks on in wonder and is drawn to Christ through us.

That’s what should naturally happen in the Church. Joy comes from the knowledge that through the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, God has washed us clean from our sins, from our old ways, and from everything that separates us from him. Joy never comes from Christians thinking that they’ve somehow achieved some standard of good morals on their own. Joy comes in the knowledge that we’ve been cleansed and freed by God’s grace and that new-found joy is what proclaims

Christ to the world more than anything else we can do.

In verses 9-13 Paul puts all of this in the bigger picture. He says:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — 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. 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. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.

Again, the Corinthians had got it wrong. Paul had written them in an earlier letter warning them not to associate with those guilty of gross sin. They took that to mean that they needed to withdraw from the world. And now Paul’s writing and saying, “No. That’s not what I meant. I’m not worried about us associating with the world (at least within reason). My point was that you not associate with people who call themselves Christians, and yet continue to live in unrepentant sin, just as if they weren’t Christians.”

He’s right. We can’t avoid the world. In fact, remember that Jesus actually sends us out into it. He told his disciples in Matthew 10:16: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” That’s our *mission*. God has already pronounced judgement on sin. Our mission is to share the cross of Christ with the world, because it’s the only source of hope – the only way sinners will escape God’s judgement on sin. And that’s exactly why we need to judge those in our *own* ranks. Are there those that are casting the Church in a bad light and destroying her witness? Those who continue in their immorality, greed, idolatry, reviling, and drunkenness, showing no repentance need to be removed, because they represent the world, not Christ. Because as they misrepresent the cross, they actually turn people *away* from Christ.

Friends, part of being the Church is that we hold each other accountable, even it means excluding them from our fellowship. Hopefully we deal with our sin before it goes to that extreme. But consider how effective the Church would be in her mission if we really did live out the joy that comes from the knowledge that we have found forgiveness and new life through the cross of Christ, if we truly did come every Sunday to celebrate that new life we’ve been living all week by coming to the Lord’s Table to find communion with Jesus. But to do that we need to walk together in the beauty of holiness. That’s the unique privilege that God has given us. And as we live in that victory over the forces that destroy others, that’s when people will start to see that there really is something powerful in Jesus Christ and in his cross.

Please pray with me:
Heavenly Father, your truth is sometimes hard for us to hear, but we thank you for caring enough for us that you’ve spoken to us in words like this. Father, you don’t spare us, and yet for Christ’s sake you don’t condemn us either. Through the Spirit inspired Word you give us your truth. Give us the grace to see behind the truth your own love for us. And, Father, help us as your Church and as individuals to judge our lives in these areas, always according to your word, that we might walk in its light and power. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.