

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

One of the very real benefits and challenges of an expository Bible ministry is that the preacher has to cover every chapter in a given book. You can't skip over the hard bits, the tough bits, the bits that you wish sometimes Paul hadn't written!

That's where Truth for Today is a real winner—you see, my aim is to teach my way through the entire Bible and to do it in a systematic manner. That means when I come to a chapter like 1 Corinthians 5, I can't miss it out. It's there, it's inspired, and it has to be covered. So, my friend, fasten your seat belt, you'll not be sitting comfortably, but here goes!

Basically, this in-your-face chapter is all about protecting the testimony of the local church, guarding her purity, combined with the exercise of church discipline. We live in a filthy dirty world and the church should be whiter than white. We live in a world where anything goes—in that postmodern environment, it is imperative that the church gets its act together. We need to stand up and be counted and be seen as men and women of the book.

The church has a voice and it needs to be heard, distinctly and directly. The fact is, if the church has lost its way and tolerates anything and everything, then we lose our right to speak and we lose our right to be heard by a cynical Joe Public. Sadly, within the evangelical church, that loss of influence is all too common in today's forty-shades-of-grey society.

Paul's impassioned appeal in chapter 5 resonates with anguish and reality. He knows only too well what is at stake, he longs for the church to deal with sin and to deal with it in such a way that will put the fear of God into the hearts of those who are causing all kinds of problems.

When a congregation is aware of sin in their midst, they have a solemn responsibility before God to deal with it—if they don't, they will very quickly discover that it's like a cancer, for it spreads. These things are best nipped in the bud.

To change the analogy, the man's a fool who lets a forest fire rage out of control. In the same way, church discipline is vital if the church is to make serious inroads into enemy territory; on top of that, it is essential if she is to have a significant influence in a pagan culture.

It may not be deemed 'politically correct' to do what Paul says we must do—but we're not answerable to a government, we're accountable to the living God, and his word is our final court of appeal. If God says we do it, quite frankly, we have no option at all but to toe God's party line.

I think we'll pause for a short music break, that'll give you time to catch your breath. When we come back in a minute or two, I want us to launch right into chapter 5 where Paul gives us some timely advice on how to handle a scandal.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul is upfront with his opening salvo in 1 Corinthians 5. Right at the outset, he's in confrontational mode, and he's in no mood to cover up what's being condoned inside the four walls of the church in Corinth.

The folks are worshipping together as a community of God's people and they are aware of the stinking sin that is happening among them—it is bad, but the situation is inflamed because of the despicable nature of what's going on.

If the guy was committing adultery with some other woman, it has to be said, that's bad enough; but he's gone even beyond that—he's having a physical relationship with someone whom Paul calls in verse 1: 'his father's wife'.

The guy must be crazy, out of his mind; he's bedded down not only with another woman, but with his stepmother! Paul makes the interesting point that even the heathen pagans don't do that kind of thing. When it comes to sexual relationships inside and outside of marriage, they could teach these folk a thing or two! That's how bad it was!

The reality is that the locals all knew what was going on, the folks in the wider community were very much aware of it, this guy was the talk of the town! In all fairness to them, they were repulsed by it, they were sickened by it. Actually, the Romans prohibited by law an incestuous relationship like this.

You can see what's happening, you can see the reason why the preacher Paul is so angry with them—this guy was breaking the law of the land, at the same time he was flouting the God's law, the church's name was a byword for infamy in the community, the name of our Lord was being dragged through the muck, the leadership were doing nothing about it—at the end of the day, it was a real mess!

It happened away back then in the first century. Hey folks, you can take it from me, to a greater or lesser degree, it happens in gospel churches in the twenty-first century as well. If you think I'm exaggerating, you're living in cloud cuckoo land. We have to face up to these harsh issues, we shouldn't bury our heads in the sand and pretend they're not there. They are! It's how we deal with them, that's the real issue! Paul gives us a handful of excellent guidelines in this chapter.

More on that score after the music break.

MUSIC BREAK

It's amazing how quickly we become desensitised to a situation – it's almost incomprehensible what's going on in the church in Corinth and the folks there have done little or nothing about it. They've got used to it. Sanitised, as it were!

They've been wading in the stagnant waters of pride for so long that they failed to see the real filth of their situation. That's when Paul steps into the frame and talks to them about their reaction, he tells them his feelings concerning the scandal, and then he explains how situations like this should be handled. If Paul is anything, he's not one of these 'all talk' people, he's a 'hands on' pastor who's not afraid to deal with hard issues. He doesn't duck or dodge the tough ones!

Paul sternly rebukes them in verse 2. He, first of all, castigates them for their arrogant nose-in-the-air pride. They had adopted a destructive view of God's grace. They reckoned when a man becomes a Christian he can do whatever he wants to do—free from the law, o happy condition! Well, that's pushing it too far so far as Paul is concerned. Number one it's not right, and two, it's not biblical.

These folks should have grieved with sad and sorry hearts over this man's sin like a mother laments over the death of her child. Instead they were complacent and happy-go-lucky, they didn't want to rock the boat! Some folks will do anything for a quiet life even if it means condoning such an appalling sin as this one in their church. People become indifferent to what's going on around them; church members fail to recognise that they have a profound responsibility to one another in the church family. If a man falls into sin, we must do something about it!

Even though Paul isn't with them in body, he reminds them in verse 3 that he's there in heart and mind—it's probably good for them that he's not there in the flesh, otherwise they would know all about it! Paul knows what needs to be done, so he tells them exactly what he thinks.

He realised for the good of the sinning brother and the rest of the congregation that someone must take a stand—discipline must be carried out. There are no two ways about it; biblical discipline has to be implemented and, so far as the apostle Paul is concerned, the sooner the better!

I think it's worth noting in verse 4 that Paul doesn't appeal to church tradition nor does he recommend they look up the relevant page in the church constitution. He doesn't even call on the church leadership to come down on this guy like a ton of bricks. Instead, he exhorts and encourages the congregation at Corinth to do what needs to be done in the name and power of the Lord Jesus Christ. After all is said and done, it's his name that is at stake, it's his glory and honour that is on the line, not that of the church leadership.

Paul leaves them in no doubt as to the best way for them to proceed. He gives them three clear instructions in verse 5 for disciplining a sinning believer—let me say at this point: these guidelines have not been rescinded or withdrawn, they are as relevant today as they were back then.

These three factors are a trio of timeless principles that every congregation needs to keep in mind when faced with similar scenarios. That's where we have full-blown confidence in the word of God. And that's where Scripture is incredibly relevant down the generations and across the cultures. God's message is never outdated!

The first thing Paul says is: 'hand this man over to Satan'. The Corinthian church is to excommunicate sinning believers, they are to kick them out, releasing them into Satan's domain which happens to be the world (we know that from verses 2 and 13). When such folk find themselves outside the spiritual protection of the church, they will be unable to repel the devil's attacks. I think we need to remember that the devil is no friend to God's dear people, he is hell-bent on destroying and eliminating the church of Jesus Christ.

Paul's second comment revolves around the phrase: 'so that the sinful nature may be destroyed'. If you're reading from the NIV, you'll notice at the bottom of the page that phrase can be read like this: 'so that his body or flesh might be destroyed'. I reckon Paul wants this person to experience the full rigours of hell on his body so that he'll think twice before he indulges in such sin in the future. It's as if the devil is allowed to push all those fleshly passions to the extreme, creating such an anguish in the person that his lust is destroyed. In moments like that, he will either sink or swim.

Paul's third reason is so that 'his spirit [may be] saved on the day of the Lord'. You see, no matter how harsh the discipline, the goal is not punishment but restoration. Discipline is only a means to an end, and that end is to see the offending person back in warm fellowship with the Lord and his people. When it is evident that the man is broken before God, then the prodigal should be welcomed

home to the family of God's people. Once a change of mind and heart is obvious, there is no need to keep such an individual on the outside—they should be extended the privilege of again linking up with God's local congregation of believers. They have learned their lesson and, hopefully, so too has the local church!

Three principles to invoke when people turn away from the word of God and get involved in one sin or another. There is no sense of being vindictive, there is no hint of the 'we're-out-to-teach-you-a-lesson-you'll-not-forget' mindset. When such discipline is administered, it is to be done caringly and lovingly and always with an eye of pity for the fallen brother. When it is done, it is never carried through with an attitude of pride or a 'this could never happen to me' kind of attitude.

I think we'll pause here for a music break and, when we come back, I want us to look at the rest of the chapter. There's just so much packed into this one neglected chapter that we can't afford to miss any of it out.

MUSIC BREAK

The next three verses go back to basics when Paul reminds us that sin spreads like wild fire. Give the devil one inch and he will take more than the proverbial mile! Paul used the analogy of yeast in a batch of dough. It spreads, it infects, it influences, it does no good whatsoever. It has to be gotten rid off, it has to be totally wiped out. It has to be thoroughly eliminated, every last drop.

Paul realises that sin is a powerful factor in our lives, it has a seriously disruptive influence in the life of the church as well. If we play around with sin, before long, it will make a fool out of us! Paul says, be real, be genuine, be what you are in Christ. Don't hanker after the old lifestyle, don't play the old games, don't walk down the old paths—you're a new creation, you're brand new people.

Follow Jesus: follow Jesus only! only follow Jesus! You see, folks, there are things worth holding on to in this life. By the same token, there are certain things we're best getting rid off, and sin just happens to be one of them!

In the next few verses, Paul clears the air when he leaves them in no doubt that there are some folks they're better not hanging around. He faces up to the reality that we can't opt out of this world, we can't stop the world and jump off, we're here, we're in it, but there's one thing that we can do and should do: we can pick and choose those whom we spend time with!

Paul says quite explicitly in verse 9 that we should not be seen associating 'with sexually immoral people'. They say, you can always tell a man by the type of company he keeps; many of us know from experience that company either makes a man or else it breaks a man.

It's true as I said a moment ago that you and I can't be spiritual hermits and live in a cloister of isolation—that doesn't work, it never has done and it never will! There are hordes of dyed-in-the-wool sinners all around us. We know who they are, they should know who we are!

The difference comes when it's happening in the church with believers dabbling in these kinds of sin—that's when it's wrong and that's when we have to take a step back and disassociate ourselves from them. That's what Paul makes crystal clear in verse 11. In fact, it couldn't be any plainer!

Paul goes so far as to tell us that we should never countenance even sharing a meal with such folks. We should never have them round to our place for a cup of tea and a sticky bun. We should never entertain them at a local fish and chip shop or buy them a meal in a local restaurant. Yes, their names are on our prayer list, and we faithfully remember them before the Lord; however, they are to be kept at a discreet arms length. In the purpose of God, there comes a time when it is better for them and it's best for us to part company! They go one way and we keep on going God's way!

Paul rounds the chapter off with a fresh insight into who church discipline is really for. He makes it clear that it has nothing to do with unbelievers. If someone doesn't know Jesus as Lord and Saviour we can't expect them to walk the path of holiness. We can't

inflict our standards upon them nor can we expect them to adopt our lifestyle either. Both of us are marching to the beat of a different drum, we're loyal to different flags and our allegiance is to different leaders.

That's why Paul unequivocally declares that church discipline is restricted to those who are in the faith, to those who belong to Jesus Christ. Ok we have our views on those outside the church, and that's fine—however, says Paul, more important for us to get our own house in order before we sit in judgment on those who don't have a relationship with Christ.

The unmistakable won-t-go-away fact is as Paul himself says: God will judge those outside. And look, folks, he doesn't need our help in the process. We have enough to get on with in our own lives, we have enormous challenges within our own local churches—let's start where we are, let's be pure and holy in all our conduct, let's be real, let's live for Jesus both in the home and in the world—there's no mileage in you and I being one thing at home and something different in the church—Paul is looking for godly consistency.

When we get it right, it's great, and things move forward and God showers his blessing upon us—when things go wrong and we mishandle those who fall into sin, we end up making a rod for our own backs. Sin is serious, and it must always be dealt with! It cost Jesus his life! That's why Paul says what he does.