

Text: I Corinthians 5:1-13

Title: “Moral Matters ... Accountability”

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles with me to I Corinthians 5. After a break in our study of I Corinthians I want to return to it as we work our way through this lengthy letter from Paul to a church with lots of problems ... the church at Corinth. The first four chapters deal with the prevailing problem in the church, namely, disunity. But the situation in this church is much more complicated.

ILLUSTRATION – Over the weekend I was visiting a church member in the hospital. He’s facing a very complicated situation in his body. He has kidney problems, lung problems and heart problems. The doctors are having to be very skillful in treating the various problems because to deal with one disease affects the other diseases. So they’re struggling to create balance in his body.

That happens to churches as well. Every local church is a miniature Body of Christ, the universal church. And every member of the church is interconnected, just like parts of a human body are interconnected. What affects one, affects the others.

Now in I Corinthians 5-6 Paul is dealing with some “Moral Matters.” We’re going to camp here for a few weeks and see what the Lord wants to teach us as a church and as individuals about morality. Morals really do matter in the Body of Christ. We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do. Morals really do matter.

Read I Corinthians 5:1-2:

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?”

There is great value in preaching through a book of the Bible. It forces us to deal with matters that may not be all that fun to deal with. I’m not sure too many pastors relish the idea of preaching a message from I Corinthians 5. I hope that what it does for us is to make us more genuinely appreciate the importance of our accountability to and for one another in the Body of Christ for the way we live our lives.

Now there are three main issues in I Cor.5-6:

- The issue of accountability that we will deal with today
- The issue of integrity that we see in Ch.6
- The issue of sexual purity that Paul will return to in Ch.6

Now in ancient cities like Corinth there was a casual acceptance of sex outside of the marriage relationship. Corinth was the location of a temple devoted to the worship of sex, the temple of Aphrodite. Therefore, it was a common part of the lifestyle of the Corinthians. A word was coined ...

corinthianize ... it meant to live in sexual promiscuity. So many of the church members had engaged in sexual promiscuity before they became Christians and it was difficult for them to break their old habits.

v.1 - “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife.

Paul doesn’t say exactly how this information was reported to him. We know that some in the church had written a letter to Paul with questions and concerns. There may also have been a delegation who came in person to speak to Paul about the situation in the church.

Whatever the case, it was common knowledge that people within the church were engaged in sexual immorality. The word used here is *porneia* ... from which we get our word pornography. It means any kind of sexual activity outside of the relationship between a husband and wife.

In this case it was practiced openly and blatantly. It involves a man and his step mother. This kind of relationship is strictly prohibited in the Bible. On top of that, even the pagans thought it disgusting.

Now we’ll come back to the matter of sexual purity in a couple of weeks when we come to Ch.6. The matter that disturbs the apostle more than anything is the way that the church responded to this. What precipitates this section in Paul’s letter is the failure of the church to be accountable for one another.

It’s really about church discipline ... a topic that we just don’t deal with all that often.

ILLUSTRATION - When I was pastor of First Baptist, Artesia, New Mexico, I came across some old minutes of church business meetings from back in the early 1900s. On one particular occasion, the church publicly rebuked a church member because he played the fiddle at dances.

Unfortunately there has been gross misunderstanding about this matter of our accountability to and for one another in the way we conduct ourselves. It has been handled very poorly and in a wholly unloving manner. But that doesn’t negate the necessity of accountability to one another in the Body. I cannot simply live as a believer any way I want to. God’s Word prescribes a lifestyle for us, and when we choose to ignore that, it doesn’t just hurt us; it hurts the entire church.

There are some principles that need to guide our accountability to and for one another:

1. THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMBLE HOLINESS (vv.1-2)

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (NIV) - It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

When I say “humble holiness” I mean that we have such awe for God and His Word that we are broken when we see sin manifested in our own lives or the lives of others of God’s people.

What was happening here is that the Corinthians had a faulty view of grace and freedom. It had given way to tolerance of things that God has called wrong. They were “proud,” literally “puffed up.”

Now when it says that “a man has his father’s wife” the original language indicates an ongoing sinful relationship. This was not a one-time occurrence.

Note: Sexual immorality, in whatever form it takes, is sin. But you need to know that God forgives and cleanses us from all kinds of immorality when we confess and repent.

Example: Jesus dealing with the woman at the well

I know so many people who are locked up in a prison of guilt and condemnation because they sinned in this way. Confess it to God. Confess to and ask forgiveness of others who were offended by the sin. Then in the grace and love of Jesus Christ “go and sin no more.”

But the situation we have before us here in Scripture is altogether different. This was not an isolated incidence, but rather a sin that was flaunted. Everyone in the church and outside the church knew what was going on. It was a scandal. And the church was simply winking at it.

v.2 – “You are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief...”

Humble holiness is what Paul talked about to the Galatians.

Galatians 6:1 - Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

The next principle that guides us through this is...

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF COURAGEOUS ACTION (vv.3-5)

1 Corinthians 5:3 - Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.

Paul knew enough about the situation to know what needed to be done. He could see it very clearly.

When it says “I have already passed judgment on the one who did this...” he is not talking about a judgmental spirit that condemns and criticizes others. It’s not the hypocritical, self-righteous judging Jesus condemned in the Pharisees.

Rather Paul recognizes that a cancer is growing in the Body. He’s seen all the evidence he needs. Action must be taken for the good of the church and the offending brother.

I Corinthians 5:4 - When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,

Let me pause here and say that Jesus in Matthew 18 prescribes the way things like this are handled. When a brother sins, go deal with it just between the two of you. If he listens, you have won your brother over. If he doesn't listen, take one or two others along with you to reprove the person. If that doesn't result in the man repenting, then tell it to the church. And if he doesn't respond to the church's action, then treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. In other words, treat him as though he doesn't belong to the people of God.

When we are trying our best to follow the guidelines of Scripture and to do it God's way, we can be sure that the "power of the Lord Jesus is present."

I Corinthians 5:5 - Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

When we act with courage in dealing with sin like this, and withdraw fellowship from an unrepentant person we are releasing them into Satan's domain ... the realm of the world.

There are certain things that are essential to our success in the Christian walk: Bible study, prayer, worship, service ... and you must be in fellowship with a body of believers with mutual accountability and genuine friendship.

There is a kind of protective covering when we are under the umbrella of the church.

To withdraw fellowship from a believer removes that covering. As severe as that action is, it may be only way that their spirit will be saved on the day of the Lord.

v.5 – “So that the sinful nature may be destroyed...” – Some believe that Paul is talking about physical death ... that a person could be such a detriment to the work and witness of Jesus that God would just take him out. More than likely what he's talking about here is Satan pushing a person's sinful desires to such an extreme that the person would literally be ruined, and in that horrible condition, come to see the awfulness of their life, and to repent.

But there is a goal to all of this:

v.5 – “(his) spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” The goal is not punishment, but restoration. If the man is truly saved, then this action by the church will not affect his spirit. It belongs to God.

But there's another principle...

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF EFFECTIVE INFLUENCE (vv.6-13)

Now let's read on.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8 (NIV) - Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch

without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

Now yeast or leaven is not something that many of us know about. If you bake bread or cakes, you are familiar with yeast. It is what makes the dough rise to make a fluffy cake or loaf of bread.

But what Paul is referring to here comes from the Feast of the Passover when the Jews, remembering their deliverance from Egypt, celebrated a feast. Remember what happened in Egypt as God prepared to deliver Israel from the bondage of Pharaoh and Egypt. The death angel would pass over the city to judge the sinful inhabitants of Egypt, but the people of God would be spared as they took the blood of a lamb and sprinkle it over their doorposts so the angel of death would "pass over." Then they would gather and eat the meat of the lamb that had been roasted.

But the people of God were not to have any yeast during this feast, so they were to make a careful search of the house to look for yeast in order to remove it from the house.

Why? Yeast is symbolic. In the Scriptures it is a symbol of evil.

Now as NT believers, Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed, and through our faith in him, we have become new people. And just as the OT people of God made a careful search for yeast, representing sin, so we must ...

v.8 - keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

You see, yeast is a symbol of influence. And our influence is effective ... for good and for evil

Two-way influence:

- **The influence of church on the disciplined offender**

When we act like the true people of God, the influence we can have on one another is powerful. We can encourage one another to avoid sin ... to think twice before we have an affair, or before we do anything else that could harm the work and the witness of Christ.

- **The influence of the undisciplined offender on the church**

But the opposite can happen. When we do not hold one another accountable, sin has an awful effect on the whole church. A little yeast is all it takes to cause the entire loaf of bread to be influenced.

Now there's a misunderstanding that apparently arises.

1 Corinthians 5:9-10 (NIV) - I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.

The challenge is this: How do we insulate ourselves from the world without isolating ourselves from the people of the world whom God wants to love through us?

So the principle is stated clearly again:

1 Corinthians 5:11-13 (NIV) - But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. ¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – Allow me to read the account of how one church handled something like this. In the words of the pastor:

“About two-and-a-half years ago we had the sad experience of disciplining a man by removing him from membership for repeated and unrepentant adultery. We followed the guidelines of Matthew 18 and his response was, "I know what I'm doing...I know what you have to do...so do what you must because I don't care! I plan to never darken the doors of this church again anyway! So why should I care!" He proceeded to divorce his wife in civil court. His wife continued to attend church, and there were many tearful times with her during prayer meetings. At cell group meetings, we prayed God would do whatever necessary to open this man's eyes and bring him back into a right relationship with himself. Last August, this man called me and asked if we could meet. At my office he threw himself on my shoulder and wept, and said he wanted to confess his sin. He said "the Hound of Heaven" had been on his trail for nearly two years, and he couldn't take much more. He set aside his divorce and sought to renew his marriage. Even his wife, who had said she probably could never trust him again, was amazed at the change in his life. This man was active in the Army Reserves, and his unit had been sent overseas to process the bodies of the military who died in Iraq and prepare them for their return to the States. God's hand was working in his life as he was confronted on a daily basis with the brevity of life and permanence of eternity. Following this tour of duty, and upon returning home, he met with the elders, confessed his sin, and asked to be forgiven for his arrogance and the impact his life had on the local body. What a joy to announce at the congregational meeting, after 2½ years, that discipline against this man was lifted and that he was restored to the fellowship! I am reminded that, when we do things God's way, he does not always respond in our timing nor with the short-term results we desire, but his way is always right, best, and true. With praise, the whole church got to see God at work restoring both the man and his marriage.”

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