

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study: 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

Bob and Larry were good friends who had grown up in the church together and had served together in various ministries in their congregation over the years. One day, Larry told Bob and a few other friends in the church that he was in a sexual relationship with someone from his workplace. Bob expressed his disapproval and told Larry that he needed to end the relationship. This placed a strain on their friendship, but they continued to be on good terms and to serve together in the church. After a few months, Larry announced that he had moved in with his girlfriend. Bob and some others spent time over the next few days with Larry, trying to explain from Scripture why this was wrong. In the end, Larry refused again to end the relationship, arguing, "I appreciate your concern, but that's just your interpretation. Other people in the church that I've talked with don't see anything wrong with this and are glad I'm shaking up the status quo. The way I see it, the Bible was written for a different time and place. Those things really don't apply to us in the modern age.... I still believe in God and in Jesus, so what's the problem?" What (if anything) should Bob do? Could anything have been done differently?

In 1 Corinthians chapters 1-4, Paul addresses the issue of divisions within the Corinthian church, pointing to the Corinthians' pride and reliance on worldly wisdom rather than God's wisdom as primary causes of these divisions, and calling them repentance. In chapters 5-6, he turns his attention to other issues that had arisen in the Corinthian church.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

-What problems in the church at Corinth does Paul deal with in this chapter?

- Sexual sin / immorality within the church, and of a kind not even tolerated by pagans
 - Most flagrant example being of a man having an ongoing sexual relationship with his father's wife
 - But likely immorality present more broadly in the church (e.g. 1 Cor. 6:12-20)
- But perhaps just as disturbing to Paul was the lax attitude the Corinthians seemed to have towards sin in their midst
 - seemed to accept/tolerate this immorality in their midst as if nothing were wrong

Re-read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5:

-What was wrong with what the man in v.1 was doing? (cf. Leviticus 18:1-8; Romans 2:23-24)

- having a sexual relationship with his father's wife - not his own mother, but one of his father's other wives (i.e. his step-mother)
- a form of incest – prohibited in the OT Scriptures (e.g. Lev. 18:1-8)
 - endorsement of the sexual ethic of the OT by Paul for application to the NT Church
- even more shocking that his was present in the Church, as this was a type of sexual relationship that even the pagans at Corinth – who were known for their sexual immorality - wouldn't have tolerated
 - serious potential to being reproach to God's name among the pagans to have this sort of immoral behavior committed by one of His people (cf. Romans 2:23-24)

-How did the Corinthian Christians respond to this man and what he was doing? Why do you think they responded the way they did?

- they were indifferent and tolerated what he was doing without confronting his sin
- Paul's rebuke in v.2 ("And you are arrogant!") – could possibly suggest they were affirming and proud that they were being so tolerant / affirming
 - But more likely, Paul was referring back to 4:18, where he said there were some in the church who were arrogant → in this context, Paul is saying they have nothing to be proud of, when they tolerate such immorality in their midst – rather, that they should be ashamed and mourn
- The Corinthians were likely reflecting to some degree the background from which they came
 - different standards of what constituted immorality in the society around them - much of what Christians would consider sexually immoral wouldn't have been viewed as such by the Corinthian society (much as it is today)
 - may not yet have come around to full understanding to the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic
 - however, it's possible they also misunderstood/misapplied the implications of salvation in the area of sexual sin
 - our sins have been forgiven & we have been saved in Christ → may have come to the wrong conclusion that it didn't matter then what we did with our physical bodies
 - perhaps admixture of contemporary philosophical system which taught that matter was corrupt but spirit was good → 'our spirits are saved so it doesn't matter what we do with our bodies'
 - c.f. 1 Cor. 6:13 – "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"
- they might therefore have seen what the man was doing as no big deal, now that our spirits have been saved in Christ
 - might perhaps even have been a source of pride – that they have moved even beyond the sexual ethic of those around them

-How should the Corinthians have responded(v.2)? What does this say about how Christians should respond when a brother or sister is living in sin?

- should have mourned over this man's sin and called him to repentance → remove him from fellowship if necessary
- Christians should see and recognize the sin for what it is; should feel sorrow over our own sins and those of our brothers and sisters
 - confront the sinner and call him/her to repentance

-In v. 2-5, what does Paul command the Corinthians to do? (cf. Matthew 18:15-20) What does it mean to “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh”, and what is the goal of doing this (v.5; cf. 2 Cor. 2:5-11 & 7:8-10; James 5:19-20)?

- calls on the Corinthians to remove the man from fellowship (and stop associating with him – 5:9-11)
- presumably some in the church had already confronted the man, as per Matthew 18:15-20, and the man was unrepentant
- Paul had already pronounced judgment on the man, and calls on the church to follow through on Jesus’ command in Matt. 18:17
 - do be done when assembled together in the name of the Lord Jesus
 - calls to mind Matt. 18:20 – when 2 or 3 gathered in His Name, He is in their midst
 - the power of the Lord Jesus is present with those gathered in His name
 - cf. Matthew 18:18 - “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”
 - Paul with them in spirit (i.e. with them in the Holy Spirit)
- Paul refers to this as delivering the man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh -various thoughts about what this means
- Paul makes a similar reference in 1 Timothy 1:19-20, regarding Hymenaeus & Alexander
- Christians have been delivered from the domain of darkness (i.e. under the power of Satan – 1 John 5:19) into the kingdom of the Son of God (Col. 1:13)
 - church discipline ‘reverses’ this process → removes a person from fellowship in the kingdom of the Son and turns him back out to Satan’s domain
 - “destruction of the flesh” (or of the “sinful nature” as per NIV)→ refers to repentance
 - in repentance, the flesh/sinful nature needs to be crucified/put to death
 - ‘flesh’ refers not necessarily to the physical body, but to the passions/desires of the flesh
- some think that this also entails God permitting Satan to attack the person under discipline (e.g. like Satan being permitted to attack Job in Job 1-2- albeit for different reasons in Job’s case), to cause suffering that would help bring the person to his senses (cf. parable of the Prodigal son – Luke 15:11-32)
 - in this case, ‘destruction of the flesh’ may also refer to a component of physical suffering, resulting from Satan’s attacks
- The goal of this process is restoration – “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (v.5)
 - i.e. to elicit godly sorrow that produces repentance and leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:8-10)
 - i.e. that the person would repent and return to the Lord, and so be forgiven and restored (2 Cor. 2:5-11)

-What do these passages teach us about how Christians should respond when a brother or sister is living in unrepentant sin? What does it teach us about discipline in the Church? (For example, when is it necessary, and how is it to be conducted?)

- Should cause us to grieve/mourn over our sin and that of our brother/sister
 - the sin of one affects the entire Body (5:6-8 - more on this in the next study)
 - call & encourage one another to repentance; per pattern laid out by Jesus’ in Matthew 18 (one, then two or three, then the whole church, then removing from fellowship if necessary)
 - in situations where there is an ongoing pattern of sin with an ongoing refusal to repent, it may become necessary to bring the matter to the whole church and removal from fellowship with stubborn refusal to repent
 - done with heavy hearts & grief, but needs to be done regardless
- Goal (& hope) is repentance & restoration
 - where there is repentance, there needs to be forgiveness and restoration with gentleness (Gal. 6:1)

Reflection and application

We are commanded as members of Christ’s body to confront, and if necessary, to discipline those in the church who persist in sinful ways. Though superficially, it may seem more “loving” to let our brother go his own way, the Bible is clear that continued disobedience dishonors God (Rom 2:24) and leads to destruction (1 Cor 6:9-11). Thus, the truly loving thing to do is to turn him from the error of his ways and save him from death (James 5:20). In the case of the Corinthian believer who was committing incest, Paul rebuked the church for failing to exercise appropriate discipline, then commanded them to put out of their fellowship this man, handing him over to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (v.5)

Yet, while we are commanded to discipline those persisting in sin, we should not think ourselves more righteous than they. Rather, we are to exercise discipline in humility and with tears (v.2), knowing our own faults and seeking to restore, not to annihilate, those who may have fallen into sin (Gal 6:1). Do you know a brother or sister who is persisting in sin? Does this knowledge fill you with grief (v.2)? Confront your brother or sister in love, with a humble heart, seeking to lead him or her to repentance and restoration.