

Topic	How the Gospel Brings Justice into Church
Reference	1 Corinthians 5:1~13
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The chapter talks about church discipline. Corinth was located about 60 KM west of Athens in Greece. Now the church in Corinth was established by Paul about 20 years after the end of Jesus's earthly ministry and during Paul's second missionary journey, he spent 18 months in the city and the congregation grew rapidly as a result of his faithful ministry and all this is recorded in Acts chapter 18.

Few years later, during Paul's third missionary journey, Paul was in the city of Ephesus to the east for a period of three years and it was then when Paul received reports about the many problems besetting the Corinthian church. So it was in Ephesus that Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians Christians to address one by one the upheavals in that church.

Chapter 5 in our text today describes what was likely the most serious problem faced by the Corinthian church. It was an issue of sexual immorality, specifically the grievous sin of incest by a member of the congregation. The sin of incest is not heard in our community, so how is this text relevant to us. Members of this church and also many churches around here are largely Chinese and to the Chinese incest is not only a taboo but something utterly unthinkable. In our text, we find that incest was also a taboo in the societies in which Paul and the Corinthians lived. In fact, incest was such a moral sin that Paul was very strong and harsh in his language when he spoke against it.

I would like to draw our attention to verse 11 where we can see Paul broadening his warnings not only against the sexual immoral but also greedy people and those who are slanderers, drunkards and swindlers. In other words, Paul was really talking about the variety of grievous sins that could tear a church apart. He was trying to teach what a church ought to do when dealing with a serious internal sin that threatens the church. The sin of incest in the Corinthian church was just a specific case that Paul was using.

These grievous sins can happen to any church, so we shouldn't assume that we are immune to the kind of problems similar to what we read in our text. My point

is this that 1 Corinthians 5 is the passage that is very relevant, very useful to us to answer this earlier question about the relevance of the text.

The Structure of 1 Corinthians 5

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| 1. | Problem in the church | verses 1~2 |
| 2. | Prescription for the church | verses 2~5 |
| 3. | Protecting the church | verses 6~8 |
| 4. | Purity within the church | verses 9~13 |

1. PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH VERSES 1~2

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: **A man is sleeping with his father's wife.** ² And you are proud!

Right from the onset in verse 1, Paul jumped right in to highlight this grievous sin of incest. Since the word 'mother' is not used here, the woman in question must be the man's stepmother and also she wasn't a member of the church because Paul didn't prescribe any disciplinary action on her. It is just on the man. Now as far as the father is concerned, it is likely that he already passed away or already had legally divorced the wife, otherwise it would be unthinkable for him to tolerate this illicit relationship. Now even if the woman was a widow or a divorcee, it doesn't lessen the severity of the sin as she was still the stepmother to the man. It is still nothing less than incest. The apostle was horrified at such an outrageous conduct that was going on in their community. He describes it as something that even those outside the church wouldn't think of doing and to quote, it was of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate from verse 1.

Apparently, throughout the Roman world at that time, parent-child incest was also universally considered to be wild, evil including between the stepmother and the stepson. Now its natural for members of a church to be disgusted by the sins of those outside the church, as sin is something that we take seriously, but for those outside the church to be disgusted by the sins inside the church, there is something very wrong with the church. While Paul was so shocked by the reports he received from Corinth while he was in Ephesus, he was even more disturbed by the reaction of the congregation and its leaders. He was very angry that no action was taken by the leaders. They reacted with indifference. He wrote in verse 2,

² And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?

Here a question arise, what were they proud of? Now it doesn't make sense if such a grievous sin was going on in their midst, they were actually proud of their willingness to forgive the sinful member. They were boasting, we are such forgiving people. We are so full of grace and love for this brother, look we are such tolerant and nice people, and this is what they were proud of, but they failed to understand that grace must be applied hand in hand with justice. If they truly love the brother, they would have taken corrective disciplinary action on him, so that he would turn from his evil ways. Instead, they tolerated his sinful lifestyle and made a travesty of grace.

2. PRESCRIPTION FOR THE CHURCH - VERSES 2~5

Paul prescribed three things for the church to do.

Firstly, they should be in mourning from 2. They should be ashamed that they had allowed this evil to continue in their community and even more they should be in grief that they didn't do anything about it. Paul wanted them to be remorseful, to be sorrowful over the sad state of her spiritual degradation in their church.

The second thing they needed to do was to assemble as a church to reflect upon this from verse 4. They ought to come together as a body of Christ to consider the right thing to do and Jesus would be in their midst to grant them power to do what they needed to do and Paul would be with them in spirit conferring them his apostolic authority. It was not just something that they should just leave it to the leaders because the action in the next step will require the participation of everyone in the congregation.

Thirdly,

5 hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh,

Does it mean to let him burn in hell. It certainly sounds scary, hang him over to Satan. This is already highlighted in verse 2 and that is to put him out of fellowship that's what it means. To cast him out of the congregation. First of all, the destruction of the flesh is not referring to physical death. The word flesh here refers to our sinful nature and so the destruction of the flesh means the defeat of our sinful nature, so that this person would realize his mistake and turn around and hence this third step harsh as it may sound, is actually remedial and corrective in nature. It is designed to compel the sinner to repent and to turn away from his sin. This squares with the rest of verse 5

so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

This is referring to his salvation because Paul was concerned about his salvation and hence the purpose of excommunication is really to restore the sinner to the right path, to bring him to repentance and hence church discipline is not like a policeman going to arrest the culprit, rather it is like an earthly father chastening his wayward son.

How can handing him over to Satan lead to the destruction of his flesh or his sinful nature? If anything, Satan would fend or fuel his sinful nature, his sinful nature would increase. The answer is in part 4, where Paul is talking about those inside the church and those outside from verse 12. Paul had in mind two separate realms, one the spiritual realm inside the church and two, the sinful realm outside the church, which he called this world in verse 10. Now on at least two occasions, Jesus described Satan as the ruler or prince of this world from John 12 and 14. In this sense to hand him over to Satan would mean, to expel him to the outside sinful domain controlled by Satan and hence the phrase is synonymous with putting him out of fellowship. Now this is surely a severe measure by banning him from the congregation. The intent is to administer a kind of shock treatment to try to resuscitate this renegade member from his spiritual coma, denying him membership is a drastic way to force him to choose whether he wanted to remain inside God's kingdom or he wanted to be out of God's kingdom, but there is another more important reason why Paul prescribed excommunication as a necessary cause of action and we shall come to that now in part 3.

3. PROTECTING THE CHURCH – VERSES 6~8

*⁶ Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little **yeast** leavens the whole batch of **dough**?⁷ Get rid of the **old yeast**, so that you may be a new **unleavened** batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed.
⁸ Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the **old bread leavened with malice and wickedness**, but with the **unleavened bread of sincerity and truth**.*

Here Paul used a baking metaphor to explain why they needed to cast that person out of their assembly. In short, the reason is to protect the church. So we see in this part a bunch of familiar words such yeast and dough and bread, leavened and unleavened. Leavened bread includes yeast and many other microorganisms and hence it is baked with a leavening agent. That's why it is fluffy. Unleavened bread is baked without the help of leavening agents. Jesus gave one parable

Matthew 13:33

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.

Now in this parable, leaven carries a positive connotation as a metaphor for God's kingdom but elsewhere in the Bible, every other case where leavened is mentioned, it is commonly used as a metaphor for sin, because fermentation in that piece of leaven implies a process of corruption. Leaven in the Old Testament is mostly associated with a symbol of sin. Also because leaven puffs up the dough, it is also a symbol of pride and boastfulness. Now you can understand why Paul wrote in verse 9, not to eat bread leavened with malice and wickedness, because leaven is a symbol of sin. You can see here Paul associating leaven with malice and wickedness. In this verse, he was talking about eating unleavened bread during the Passover. The festival mentioned in verse 8 here refers to the Passover feast.

As you know, the Israelites were commanded to eat unleavened bread during the seven days of the Passover feast. When we come to the Exodus account, many of us learn that the Israelites ate unleavened bread because they left Egypt in a hurry. There was no time to wait for the leaven to act on the dough, which is true but now you realize that eating unleavened bread has a deeper meaning, because God wanted them to be a people free from sin and corruption. Not only were they instructed to eat unleavened bread during the Passover, but what is less known is that there is a commandment that they should remove any trace of leaven from the house from Exodus 12:15. Why, again because leaven is a symbol of sin and God cannot tolerate sin in his people.

Paul used this metaphor to teach the Corinthians what they needed to do with regard to the case of incest in their church. Verse 6,

Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?

In other words, the sin of one single member can corrupt the whole community of believers, just like how that small piece of fermented dough can affect the whole dough. Hence the instruction to get rid of the old yeast, to cut off that person was primarily to protect the church. Now earlier, we discussed how casting him out of the congregation was intended to shock him into repentance but the more important reason is to guard the church against sin and corruption and decay. The community will be in danger if this sinner was allowed to participate in fellowship.

4. PURITY WITHIN THE CHURCH

VERSES 9~13

Here Paul repeatedly warned against mixing with people whose values are vastly different from ours. In verse 9 he told Corinthians

*⁹ I wrote to you in my letter **not to associate** with sexually immoral people—*

Again in verse 11

*¹¹ But now I am writing to you that **you must not associate** with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. **Do not even eat with such people.***

*¹³ God will judge those outside. **“Expel the wicked person from among you.”***

Paul wanted to be doubly sure that they fully understood his directive in part 2 to remove from the assembly this person singled out in verse 1. In fact, not just that one person but anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but who is actually immoral and corrupt from verse 11. But in verse 10, Paul also clarified that when we shun the sinner whom we have cast out we cannot distance ourselves from nonbelievers, for otherwise we have to leave this world as explained at the end of verse 10, because Paul recognized that while we are not of this world but we are still in this world. While we insulate ourselves from the sinful ways of the world, we are not to isolate ourselves from the world and live like hermits, rather as Jesus commanded in Matthew 5, we ought to be the salt of the earth and light of the world, to influence those outside and point them to Jesus.

Paul had in mind two separate realms, inside the church and outside the church. He was in a way comparing the two. Outside in the world we find people who are immoral and greedy, we find swindlers and idolaters from verse 10. Inside the church, people are supposed to be completely opposite, so it follows that if we find someone in the church who is immoral or greedy, a swindler or idolater he should belong to the outside. In short, although not explicitly mentioned here, Paul is eluding to the need to maintain spiritual purity within the church. We are not to behave like those outside the church and hence the directive to expel the person is not only to protect the community but also to preserve the purity within the church of God.

The Backdrop of 1 Corinthians 5

1. We must recognize that we are all **sinner**s. There is no one in the world that has never committed a sin. It is something that we all struggle with, indeed

we are all wretched sinners, saved only by the grace of God. If not for the grace of God, we are all doomed. There is nothing good in us that qualifies us before God and hence when we have to deal with a sin in the church, a good place to start is to realize that we too have sin, so that we will not assume the 'holier than thou' attitude. So that we can empathize with the brother who might be struggling with the sin, so that we can respond with empathy rather than being harsh. The gospel brings grace into church discipline, it compels us to prefer the soft way over the hard way. Our spiritual journey is a long and difficult one and some of us are further down the road, others have just started, yet others are stuck halfway. You want to help everyone in this journey to overcome the bends and potholes of sin, not by pointing fingers but through teaching, preaching, counseling and discipleship. Now that doesn't mean that we condone sin, haven't forbid, it is just that we realize that we are all in it together. This is the first perspective I want to share with you.

2. We must continually be transformed by the **Spirit**. The trouble with some Christians is that they think salvation is only about Jesus dying on the cross for their sins and they can now go to heaven. Now this is a very shallow understanding of the gospel and no wonder many do not live the victorious Christian life. The gospel is not just about conversion from being lost to being saved. Conversion must be followed by a lifelong transforming work of the Holy Spirit to help us deal with our sins. As the spirit works in our lives to transform us, He also works to convict us of our sins and the result of this is that we become more and more aware of our sins. We find sin more and more detestable and we begin to hate sin with greater and greater intensity. Thomas Watson, a 17th century English preacher once said, *'till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet'*

So the question is, do you find sin to be bitter. If you find Christ sweet, you will find sin to be bitter. You would have an increasing tendency to stay away from it. Earlier, we discussed that we are all sinners, but it is also true that whenever we sin there is an inner voice, the Holy Spirit telling us that we have done wrong and so we respond with regret and remorse. We ask God for forgiveness and we vow not to do it again and we also pray for God's strength to overcome this weakness. This is repentance, this is the result of the work of the spirit. If this is your experience each time you sin, there is evidence that the spirit is working in your life. Now on the other hand, if you sin and you think nothing of it. If there is no sense of guilt, nor a shred of sorrow whatsoever, if you think your sin is not such a bad thing then you are standing on shaky ground. John Ryle, a 19th century English bishop once said, *'If you and sin are friends, you and God are not yet reconciled'*

Back to the man in verse 1 of our text, it is likely that he was an unrepentant sinner who persisted in his incestuous relationship with his stepmother. He didn't even bother to hide this grievous sin. That's why to Paul it pose a grave danger to the church, an internal threat that needed to be cut off and hence if you understand the gospel in its entirety this is how the gospel brings justice into church discipline because there are times when we need to apply the hard way over the soft way.

It is very important to understand that the gospel is more about salvation from sin, more than salvation from hell. Charles Spurgeon once said, "*The unsaved sinner loves a salvation from hell. The true Christian loves a salvation from sin Everyone desires to be saved from the pit but it only a child of God who pants to be saved from every false Way*"

3. We must always be awed by God's **sanctity**. In fact, the holiness of God is really the main theme behind 1 Corinthians 5. It is like a big brushstroke across the page, although it is not mentioned explicitly here. We all know that how holiness is the foremost attribute of our God, but the problem is that we don't internalize this. The question is, what is your perception of God. The problem is that, we often have a diminished low view of God. Steven Lawson, an American preacher once said, "A high view of God leads to holy living...". The more you appreciate God in His holiness and perfection, the more you are propelled and compelled to lead a holy life. Three times in the Book of Leviticus God told the Israelites, BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY. God wants his people to be holy too. Always remember, it is God's desire that we be holy more than we be happy. Many people pursue happiness but not holiness. God finds sin utterly detestable. He cannot stand even the slightest iota of sin. Earlier in our text we saw how Paul told the Corinthian Christians to get rid of the sinful man because we cannot let sin contaminate this community. We can't live a holy life if we continue to tolerate sin. As we saw earlier, as the spirit of God works in us we will find sin increasingly intolerable. That's why Paul use such strong language in 1 Corinthians 5. His words were harsh and severe. Because he had a high view of God, he took a serious position against sin.

John Wesley writes, "*Before I preach love, mercy, and grace, I must preach sin, law, and judgment*". When we preach sin, law and judgment, we must stress and emphasize the holiness of God.

4. We must strive to be a church that **shines** for God. If we want to be a community of believers that reflects his holiness, we must be willing to

confront and not accommodate sin. We must be bold to deal with sin in our midst and not to close an eye. Francis Schaeffer, an American pastor once said,

"Truth always carries with it confrontation. Truth demands confrontation; loving confrontation nevertheless. If our reflex action is always accommodation regardless of the centrality of the truth involved, there is something wrong".

What we find in Corinthian church is careless accommodation and all through the Old Testament we see how God desire the Israelites to be an island of purity and godliness in a sea of nations characterized by immorality and corruption. Today, we must take heed that God also wants his church to be lights shinning for him in a darken and sinful world.

Our text today talks mostly about church discipline but it is really a call for us to live holy lives, collectively as members of the church. May we all be a pleasing aroma to God.