

The Problem of Complacency

- 1 Corinthians 5

Introduction:

- If you have your bibles with you, or on your phone, I want to invite you to turn, or swipe to 1 Corinthians 5 with me. If you can, I want you to have this passage open in front of you as we work through it together today.
- We said at the beginning of this series that the book of 1 Corinthians has some things that are more difficult for us to work through.
- This is one of those passages. Starting here, Paul is beginning to address another major issue that he's heard about in the church, and we'll get to what that issue is in a minute. But I'm sure you picked up on some of the tension in this passage, even as it was read for us a moment ago. There's some interesting stuff for us to work through here.
- But as hard as it is, it's important to slow down and spend time in passages like this. We can't just rush through them, we need to take the time to actually think through what a passage like this means, and why it's here.
- Paul's words here feel harsh, and honestly seem a bit shocking, so how do we understand them, and even more, how does what Paul is saying here impact and change how we as a church operate? Because there are some beautiful truths to be found in this chapter.
- And as we get started, I just want to give you a bit of a roadmap for where we're going to go as we work through this passage together and how we're going to understand it.
- We're going to look at three different things. We're going to look at the issue that Paul is trying to address here, we're going to look at why it's such a big problem, and finally, we're going to look at how the church is called to respond, or change in light of this issue.
- So with that in mind, let's jump right into the passage, we've got a lot to cover here.

Paul Introduces us to a New Issue in the Church:

- Paul mentions at the beginning of this chapter, that there is sin in the church that has come to his attention, specifically sexual immorality, that there is a man sleeping with his step-mother, so right away this sticks out as a pretty big issue itself.
- This is the beginning of Paul addressing the issue of sexual immorality within the church, and it's an important topic that we're going to be working through for the next few weeks as we look at the next chapters of 1 Corinthians. We're going to be here for a little while.

- But in this passage specifically, though this is the beginning of Paul's discussion about sexuality, if you look at it, the actual sin of this guy sleeping with his step-mother, isn't what Paul talks most about, though it is brought up as a big problem.
- You can see that the fact that this is happening in the church makes Paul incredibly angry, we see that in a lot of the strong wording in this passage, but what he is most focused on talking about as he's beginning to address the issue, is actually more the church's complacency towards this sin, rather than the sin itself. And really their complacency towards sin in general.
- Look at V. 1&2

"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. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you." - 1 Cor. 5:1-2 (ESV)

- Obviously the fact that this guy is sleeping with his step-mother is a huge deal to Paul. You really get a sense that he is writing to the church in utter disbelief that he actually has to tell them these things. *"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you..."*.
- But Paul's biggest concern here, is more about how the church is reacting and responding to this issue. Specifically, they aren't responding to it at all, but just letting it happen.
- And that's the big issue of 1 Corinthians 5, that the church knew of this sin that existed within their community, but was choosing to look the other way, and not deal with it.
- And there are a few suggestions for why they may have been so complacent in this situation, maybe the guy in question was a significant financial contributor to the church, maybe he held a certain social status, maybe it was just too uncomfortable to deal with it.
- And I think that this is something that can be true of us, isn't it? Most of us get really uncomfortable with the idea of confrontation, so we can have a tendency really similar to the church here, to just look the other way.
- Whatever the reason for the church not dealing with this sin, Paul's main goal in this chapter is to show the church why sin is a big deal, and why they, as a community were called not to this complacent, "look the other way" mentality, but to deal with sin.

No Such Thing as a "Private" Sin

- And I think the fact that Paul is addressing this here teaches us a really important lesson, that within the church, really there is no such thing as a "private" sin.
- Paul later addresses the idea of some other sins being tolerated within the church, which they are called to guard against, in V. 11 he says:

“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” - 1 Cor. 5:11 (ESV)

- So Paul is really talking about an issue that goes much broader than just sexual immorality, but I think he is very intentional that sexual immorality specifically is the sin that he’s bringing up in talking about this issue of complacency, because our sexuality, or sex life, is probably what most of us would consider to be among the most private areas of our lives. It is our business what we do, and no one else’s.
- But Paul makes it pretty clear that this just isn’t true.
- This entire passage talks about how the community of the church is called to respond to this sexual immorality. It’s not just a private or personal matter.
- We think that there are sins in our lives which affect only us, and we can just keep it to ourselves and it won’t hurt anyone, but look at Paul’s words here in V. 6.

“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” - 1 Cor. 5:6 (ESV)

- He uses this image of bread, that if you’re trying to make unleavened bread, which is bread without yeast, and yet you get a small bit of yeast in the dough, it won’t stay isolated in its own part of the bread, it will impact the entire loaf.
- The same was true here. This guy sleeping with his step-mom was not just some private matter that only impacted him, it was something that did actually impact the entire church.
- And this sets up what Paul is going to talk about in the next couple of chapters because he wants the church to know, good and well, right off the bat, that sex matters. What we do with our body matters. It’s not just a private matter that impacts only us and isn’t anyone else’s business, it is something that actually matters to God, and to the church.
- And more broadly than that, sin matters. These little things that we think are only impacting us, maybe one or two other people if they’re aware of it, it’s just not true. What we do and how we live matters.
- And as Paul is bringing up this issue of sexuality here, he is going to elaborate more on the importance of sex over the next couple of chapters that we’re going to look at.
- But he starts right here, making it clear that it affects the whole church, and the church is called to respond to this kind of sin.
- And I think it’s important to take a moment here to talk about the kind of sin that Paul is talking about here, because he’s not calling the church to be watching each other like hawks, waiting to pounce at the first sight of someone messing up.

- None of us is perfect, we are all sinners who struggle and regularly fail and mess up. That's true of me, and everyone here, but what Paul is talking about is those who are living in blatant, plain, and unrepentant sin.
- People who know that what they are doing is wrong and yet, continue to actively, and rebelliously live in that sin, refusing to deal with it.
- That's the kind of sin that Paul is calling the church to address here, and we'll see how that plays out a little bit later.
- Because when we don't deal with these sins in the church, and we choose to look the other way, and we're complacent towards sin, as the church in Corinth was, as Paul is pointing out, it actually damages us as a church, so I want to take a moment to really quickly look at two ways the church is impacted and damaged when we are complacent and don't deal with sin, then we'll look at how Paul actually calls the church to change.

The Harm of Complacency:

It damages our witness to the world (V. 1-2)

- The first danger, or issue for the church that comes out of this kind of complacency towards sin is that it damages our witness to the world around us.
- Paul says in V. 1 that this sexual sin which exists within the church, is not even tolerated among the pagans. I want you to let that sink in for a second.
- We've talked about the fact that Corinth was essentially synonymous with immorality, so what does it say that even they thought that some of the things going on in the church were crossing the line?
- If we as the church are claiming to preach Christ and him crucified, like Paul talked about earlier in the letter, talking about repentance and forgiveness of sin, yet we refuse to actually deal with sin in our community when we're made aware of it, what does that say to those who are outside looking in?
- We're telling people that they need to turn to Christ to receive forgiveness, and yet they look at us and think at best, "you're just as bad as we are", or in the case of the Corinthian church, "you're even worse".
- So when people hear us calling them to repentance and faith in Christ, they see hypocrisy.
- And this is something that we hear commonly in the world today, that Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites.
- And it doesn't just impact their view of us when they see these things, ultimately it will impact how they view Christ.

- As the church, we're meant to be ambassadors, and representatives of Christ. So if people look into the church and see us telling them to deal with their sin in the name of Christ, yet refusing to deal with our own sin, that view of hypocrisy becomes their view of who Christ is.
- Our complacency damages our witness to the world.

It diminishes our view of the cross (V. 7-8)

- Not only does this complacency affect the world's view of who Christ is and what he's done, it actually impacts our view of Christ as well.
- There is this interesting phrase in there:

"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." - 1 Cor. 5:7 (ESV)

- He's reminding the people, yet again, of what Christ has done for them, and by extension, how serious their sin really is.
- Calling Jesus the "*Passover lamb*" is specifically meant to remind them of the high price that needed to be paid because of their sin.
- Because of our sin, we deserve death, but Christ took that punishment onto himself so that we could be freed from sin. It's something that we never could have dealt with on our own.
- But when we see sins like this in the church, and just choose to look the other way, it's as if we're looking at sin and saying "it's not really that bad" and "We don't really need Christ. We're good on our own".
- In the book of Romans Paul takes a lot of time explaining that through Christ, and the Gospel we are set free from our sin, but that doesn't mean that we're just given a free pass to do whatever we want.

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." - Rom. 6:1-4 (ESV)

- And he returns to this idea in V. 8 in our passage.

"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." - 1 Cor. 5:8 (ESV)

- When we aren't willing to deal with sin, it lessens our view of the seriousness of sin, and by extension, lessens our view of the greatness of Christ and the Gospel.

The Church's Response:

- And so as Paul describes to the church why this kind of complacency is such a big issue, he also helps them to understand how they are supposed to respond to this kind of sin.
- When we look at V. 2 we can see two different responses that Paul calls the church to here in light of the sin that exists in their community.

The Church is called to brokenness over sin

- The first response that Paul calls the church to in this passage is one of brokenness.
- At the beginning of V. 2, he says these words:

“And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?” - 1 Cor. 5:2a (ESV)

- The church was so busy thinking about themselves, “well I'm not that bad, I'm better than that person”, they completely missed the point.
- It comes back to the fact that this is a community issue. It's not a matter of, “they're bad, but I'm doing ok”.
- Paul is telling them that it doesn't matter if they were the ones to commit this sin themselves, they should be broken hearted that this kind of sin existed in the church to begin with.
- Think about the seriousness of sin, and the price that Christ had to pay in order to take the punishment for our sins. It cost him his life.
- Again thinking about Christ as the Passover lamb, to know the price that was required for us to receive forgiveness for our sins, we are called not to have a prideful, or a complacent attitude towards sin, but to truly have an attitude of brokenness, knowing what our sin means, and how much it cost for us to receive forgiveness.
- The church is called to brokenness over sin.

The Church is called to deal with sin

- Then in the second part of V. 2, Paul talks about the second response that the church is called to have to this kind of sin:

“Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” - 1 Cor. 5:2b (ESV)

- These are serious words.
- Then in V. 3 he says:

“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.” - 1 Cor. 5:3 (ESV)

- Almost as if to say, “even though I’m not with you, I’ve already done what you should have done in the first place”, leading by example and showing that these types of sins should not be tolerated and overlooked, but dealt with.
- Again, we look at the fact that un-repentant sin impacts not just one individual, but the whole church. So the church, as a community has a responsibility to deal with it.
- We as the church have a responsibility to respond to unrepentant sin that exists in our community, and Paul tells us what we’re called to do about these things when he says:

“Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” - 1 Cor. 5:2b (ESV)

- And going back to the bread illustration Paul used earlier, he also talks about cleansing the “old leaven”. But some of his most striking and difficult words come in V. 4-5. Look at what Paul says here:

“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.” - 1 Cor. 5:4-5 (ESV)

- There is a lot in there. These are intense words that Paul is saying to the church.
- And as we look at these words, I want to help us to understand what Paul is really saying to the church, and what it means, without diminishing the serious way that he’s saying it.
- Essentially, the situation with this man in question has reached “worst-case-scenario” status in the church.
- So when Paul tells the church to “hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh”, what he’s telling them to do, is to remove this man from the church, allow him to live in this sinful lifestyle, which he’s already shown he’s determined to do, and let him see where that gets him. And Paul makes clear that it won’t get him very far.
- Sin will always, always end badly.
- Again, this may seem harsh, but the second part of that verse is so beautiful as it shows the goal of dealing with sin this way,

“so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” - 1 Cor. 5:5b (ESV)

- Like Darryl mentioned last week, Paul is not teaching something like Purgatory, or anything like that.
- Rather Paul is showing that it is not from a place of anger or bitterness that we are called to remove someone like this from the church, to see them suffer or be rejected, but rather that the goal of doing this is actually their restoration.
- The goal, and the hope, and the prayer of dealing with sin in this way is that, through seeing the emptiness and brokenness of their own sin, the person who has been removed would be reminded of their need for Christ, and given the opportunity to repent. The goal here, is for restoration. But if we refuse to deal with it, and just pretend it's not a big deal, we're not helping anyone to see the seriousness of their sin, or showing that need for repentance and forgiveness.
- And what a beautiful picture of the Gospel this is, that we are never beyond redemption if we're just willing to see the seriousness of our sin, and our need for Christ.

Conclusion:

- And I hope that we see, through looking at a passage like this, that even in these difficult, and uncomfortable topics, we are able to see the beauty and the majesty of the Gospel and all that Christ has done for us, again, how a “Gospel Lens” completely transforms how we view life.
- And with that in mind, I want to end with one last observation about what Paul says at the end of this passage in V. 9-13:
- In V. 11 Paul points out that what he's said up to this point is meant to apply to:

“anyone who bears the name of brother” - 1 Cor. 5:11a (ESV)

- You see, Paul is incredibly skilled in anticipating the arguments of the Corinthians, and answering their questions before they have a chance to ask, getting ahead of their objections.
- You could see Paul's words in this passage as incredibly “anti-evangelistic”, but he ends here with such an important distinction in V. 10 that he is not calling the church not to associate with anyone in the world who is living sinfully.
- This is not a call to retreat within ourselves, away from the world, to escape any kind of possible contamination by sin, but to call one another, who have trusted in Christ, to the same standard of Holy living that Christ calls us to. And when there are those who openly reject that, choosing to continue living in sin and disobedience, in defiance of the one we claim to follow, the church is called to take action.
- This is one of the reasons that church membership is so important. It's a great privilege, but also comes with an important responsibility. By truly investing and connecting into a local

church we are able to hold one another accountable, and hopefully avoid getting to a situation like the one that the Corinthians were facing.

- So no matter who you are, no matter what you're struggling with, you are welcome here, and we pray that you would see your need for Christ, and make the decision to follow him.
- But for those of us who have trusted in him, and made that commitment, I want us to see in this passage how serious that commitment is, and encourage you to become members of the church, we would love to help walk you through that process, so that we can hold one another accountable to that commitment.
- Because the church has a responsibility to take sin seriously, and to call one another to a deeper commitment to follow, and worship Christ.