

| 1 Corinthians |
Week 8 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Biblical Context

The Bible book we call “First Corinthians” is at least the *second* letter Paul wrote to this church and is in response to a Corinthian letter to Paul (1 Cor 7:1) as well as the report of others (1:11). Chapter 5 moves on from the discussion concerning divisions in the church to address, not what the Corinthians wrote to Paul, but what was rather reported to Paul about the Corinthians—sexual immorality is being practiced and tolerated (5:1).¹ The issue is twofold, both the sin of sexual immorality and the Corinthian response to the sin, or lack thereof. “The problem, however, is not simply a relaxed attitude toward this sin, but whether they also tried to give a theological basis for it and thereby to condone it.”² Paul says that the nature of this sexual immorality (a man having sex with his father’s wife)³ is apparently heinous enough to not even be tolerated⁴ among the unbelievers and the Corinthian response to this immorality is one of arrogance (*φουσιόω*, *physiōō*) (5:2; cf. 4:6).⁵ Corinth was a bustling port city and melting pot of religious and cultural influence known for its immorality and debauchery.⁶ While some Corinthian believers used to practice a lifestyle of sin (6:11), their arrogance could arise from their “mistaken ‘knowledge’ that they are somehow free of normal moral constraints (6:12; 8:1; 10:23).”⁷ The Corinthians’ new “freedom in Christ” coupled with their arrogant assumption of spiritual maturity led to the smug tolerance of sinful behavior rather than the pursuit of holiness.⁸ The corporate posture should instead have been one of mourning the sin. Now their response should be to remove the sinner (5:2).⁹ A Christian continuing in unrepentant sin is a danger to the group and until he repents, must be removed from fellowship.¹⁰ As Christians, we are called to identify and actively remove sin. Colossians 3:5-6 reads, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” Complacency toward an individual’s unrepentant sin lifestyle negatively impacts the church. Removing the unrepentant man from the church was as much for the community as it was for the individual.

In 1 Cor 5:3-5, Paul draws contrast between himself and the Corinthians. While they are “puffed up” and have remained passive, Paul, on the other hand, is driven to action. Though he is not present with them physically, he is with them “in spirit,” and pronounces apostolic judgement on this man.¹¹ He urges the church to take action when they are assembled together in the name of Jesus and by the power of Jesus to “deliver¹² this man to Satan¹³ for the

¹ “Sexual immorality” (*πορνεία*, *porneia*). In Greek, the word meant “prohibited sexual relations” and this was socially acceptable in the culture. However, it is required for all Christians (whether Jew or Gentile) to abstain from *porneia* (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5).

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 215.

³ Lit. “a man is having (*ἔχειν*, *echein*) his father’s wife.” The Greek verb *echein* is a present tense infinitive which denotes a continuous relationship, as opposed to a single act. Leviticus 18:8 says, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife...” (cf. 20:11; Deut 27:20). This is likely not his biological mother, as it would have been specified (cf. Lev 18:7). God’s people are called to sexual purity. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess 4:3; cf. Col 3:5-7; Eph 5:3-13).

⁴ This tactic is used by Old Testament prophets. “In Amos 1 and 2, the prophet heightens Israel’s guilt by portraying her as worse than the surrounding nations. Israel’s indictment is the eighth and final, longest and most detailed judgment oracle.” Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 199.

⁵ In 1 Corinthians 1-4, their arrogance caused division (4:6, 18, 19), in Chapter 5, it permits continued immorality.

⁶ “In a culture where one could matter-of-factly say, ‘Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children.’” Fee, 215. “In Roman society, fornication, adultery, and prostitution were commonly practiced, but a relationship between a man and his stepmother was considered incestuous, and “treated with a sense of outrage and disgust, and punishable by deportation...” Ciampa 202.

⁷ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2197.

⁸ In 1 Cor 3:16-17, he reminds them, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?...God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” Paul reminds the church that we are to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).

⁹ The Greek word for “mourning” (*πενθέω*, *pentheō*) occurs only four times in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) in the context of mourning over personal sin or the sins of others (Ezra 10:6; Neh 1:4; 8:9; Dan 10:2).

¹⁰ This individual could not just go to another church in town. “The church of God at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2) was his only option. The removal of the unrepentant man from fellowship with his covenant family would bring grief, but godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation (2 Cor 7:10).

¹¹ He could be using “spirit” here in a psychological rather than a theological sense, offering empathetic concern (cf. Col 2:5). Ciampa, 204. Or, because “he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:17) and the Holy Spirit dwells in believers (3:16), “for Paul that means that he, too, is present among them by that same Spirit” Fee, 225. In Matt 18:20, Jesus says, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.”

¹² Cf. 1 Tim 1:19-20 where Paul says he has “handed over [two men] to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (purpose of changed knowledge and behavior). This man is to be “delivered to Satan” to destroy the sinful desire and behavior of sexual immorality, to change his knowledge and behavior.

¹³ Satan (*Σατανᾶς*, *sa-ta-nas*) comes from the Hebrew word *שָׂטָן* (*sa-tan*, “adversary”) which, among 13 other places in the Old Testament, occurs 14 times in the book of Job. The Hebrew in Job reads *שָׂטָן* (*ha sa-tan*, “the adversary”). In Job, *ha sa-tan* plays the role of an accuser in a courtroom and in Rev 12:9-11, Satan is referred to as “the accuser of our brothers...who accuses them day and night before our God.”

destruction of the flesh...” (5:5a).¹⁴ The word for “flesh” (σάρξ, *sarx*) is used in Paul’s letters to denote the sinful nature of man.¹⁵ Thus, Paul urges this man to be removed from fellowship by delivering him to the adversary¹⁶ for the destruction of his sinful nature with the purpose that “his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (5:5b). The instructions are not given to the sinner himself but to the corporate body of believers in Corinth. The removal of the incestuous man is for his own good and also for the good of the congregation. In 1 Cor 5:6, Paul chastises the Corinthians for their misplaced boasting (cf. 1:29, 31; 3:21; 4:7). He asks, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” In Scripture, leaven, which “puffs up” dough, is symbolic of sin.¹⁷ In the context of the church, the unrepentant man and the tolerance of his sin is “puffing up” the boastful church in the same way that leaven puffs up a lump of dough. Paul says “cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened” (5:7). He is urging them to align their conduct with their confession. “The identity of the Corinthians is to inform their behavior. In other words, ‘What they must become is what they already are by the grace of God.’”¹⁸ Paul urges them to therefore celebrate Christ’s sacrifice not with the leaven of malice and evil (the old self, wordly living), but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (the new self, holy living) (5:8). Christ’s sacrifice has freed us from sin and we are thus to live as those who have been set free.¹⁹

The Corinthian inaction may be related to a misunderstanding of a previous letter in which Paul instructed them not to associate with the sexually immoral (1 Cor 5:9).²⁰ While the previous letter should have been enough to prevent this issue, Paul clarifies that the church should not associate with people who claim Christ but are practicing an unrepentant lifestyle of sin (5:11).²¹ He is not saying that only the sinless can be members of the church, but rather he is concerned about those who persist in the very sin from which they have been freed through the sacrifice of Jesus (cf. 5:7).²² Christians should not judge non-Christians; God will do that (5:13).²³ However, the church is responsible to love, encourage, nurture, judge, and discipline those who follow Jesus.²⁴ Sometimes discipline looks like disassociating with Christians who persist in unrepentant sin—for the good of the church and for the eventual restoration of the individual. After the removal of the man from corporate fellowship, Paul writes in his follow-up letter that the church should forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love for the repentant individual and restore him again to fellowship (2 Cor 2:5-11). The hope and goal is repentance and restoration.

Connection and Application

The sexually permissive culture of Corinth had a normative influence on the church. Though the Corinthian believers had been set free from sin by the sacrifice of Jesus, members were still behaving like the world around them. Misunderstanding the grace of Jesus, the Corinthians condoned blatant immorality that had a detrimental impact on the church, rather than walk in holiness. We are surrounded by a fallen world that indulges in sin and can be tempted to permit sinful lifestyles because we misunderstand the grace of Christ (cf. Rom 5:20-6:2). As believers, we are a temple of the Holy Spirit both corporately (1 Cor 3:16) and individually (6:19) and are called to a life characterized by our redemption. We must love each other enough to confront blatant sin and encourage a culture of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins and our response is to put to death habitual sin in our lives, conducting ourselves in holiness by his grace, and edifying one another.

¹⁴ Romans 8:13 says, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

¹⁵ The Corinthian believers are called “people of the flesh (*sarx*)” (3:1, 3) as opposed to “spiritual” because they view the ways of God to be folly.

¹⁶ “...to turn him back out into Satan’s sphere, outside the edifying and caring environment of the church where God is at work.” Ciampa, 208.

¹⁷ The Feast of Passover begins the Week of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:4-8; Matt 26:17; Mark 14:1; Luke 22:1) when all leaven is removed from the home, symbolic of the active removal of sin from the individual’s life.

¹⁸ Ciampa, 214.

¹⁹ Cf. Rom 6:15-23

²⁰ “Associate” (συνναμίγνυμι, *synnamignymi*) means to “mix up together.” In 2 Thess 3:14, this is a last resort, if the sinning individual did not repent. Though the dissociation was intended to bring shame and conviction, the individual was to be warned as a brother, not regarded as an enemy (3:15).

²¹ It is possible that the “arrogant” did not heed Paul’s instruction because he was only one teacher among the many chosen in the divisions of the church. Paul addressed divisions and unity first (1 Corinthians 1-4) because ecclesiastical unity around the message of the gospel is paramount to the rest.

²² Fee, 245–246. This is referring to those who persist in this way of life, not those who simply struggle with former sins or moments of weakness. Hebrews 10:26-27 reads, “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”

²³ Jesus often ate with sinners and corrupt tax collectors yet had strong words for the religious Pharisees of the day.

²⁴ Ciampa, 219. In 1 Cor 4:5, Paul tells the Corinthians to not pronounce judgment. The Corinthians were chastised for judging Paul and the other teachers by man’s standards. In 5:12, the Corinthians are to judge a Christian by God’s standards, deferring judgment of unbelievers to God.