

Dear Church
1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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Often preachers will start out with an illustration to get us into the text. I don't think we need to do that today. Our passage, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, has PLENTY of intrigue, so let's begin by reading.

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. 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? For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? 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. 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.

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

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

Welcome to church. Let's pray.

In this passage, Paul confronts the Corinthians head on about SIN. I realize that for some of us and for our culture at large, SIN is a repulsive word.

I recently came across an article in which the writer was detailing the alteration of one of the lines of the old hymn *Amazing Grace* by some churches. You may remember the first stanza goes like this:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind but now I see.

What's interesting is that the line that was altered was the second one: “That saved a wretch like me” was replaced with “that saved and set me free.”

I'm not saying that there's anything *sinful* about changing that line, but it feels like as a culture we do not want to be confronted with the classic Christian teaching of sin. As Fleming Rutledge noted: "The category of sin has been displaced in our time by other categories such as disease, maladjustment, neurosis, deficiency, addiction."

In our culture, "sin" is an uncomfortable word. It has connotations of hypocritical piety. It can feel stuffy and old-school. It can bring about feelings of shame and guilt and judgmentalism. It conjures up images of hellfire and brimstone and of a God who is out to smite those who need smitten. And yet, as Blaise Pascal said, "Without this mystery [sin], the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves."

I don't know about you, but I don't know any other word to describe the condition of our world, the condition of my own heart, and the condition of other people than the word SIN.

- I see the news about a gun shooting in our backyard; ***not the way it's supposed to be.***
- I see in myself greed, pride, and an inability to love; ***not the way it's supposed to be.***
- I know what I feel when someone is emotionally manipulative or uses me for their personal gain or crosses my clearly stated, agreed upon boundaries; ***not the way it's supposed to be.***

It leaves me asking, "How do we address the areas in our lives in which we are so unlike Jesus?"

That's what Paul addresses in our text today. It's what Paul has been doing throughout this whole letter. As we've trekked through 1 Corinthians so far, we've seen Paul confront the Corinthians' disunity, lack of spiritual maturity, preference for some leaders over others, pride, and more. Why does he do this?

- Because of the cross of Jesus.
- Because he wants to properly build them up.
- Because the Corinthians are "God's temple" (3:16) and "God's Spirit dwells" in them (3:16).
- Because Paul's sole desire is to be a "faithful steward" and a "loving father" who loves his children well by applauding their areas of strength while also providing correction in their areas of weakness; he says all his challenges to them are NOT to "shame you but to warn you as my dear children" (4:14).

Like any good father will do, Paul, in our text, is going to answer that question: "How do we address the areas in our lives in which we are so unlike Jesus?" He'll answer it in three ways. First, he'll point out that the Corinthians have an INFESTATION of sin in their midst: "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" (5:1).

Amazing. A man is sleeping with, because of how this is phrased scholars say, his stepmom. Paul says that this is something that is "actually reported" about them. This is NOT Paul saying that someone found out this little secret in this man's life and told Paul about it. No, the verb here is the Greek "akouo," from which we derive our English word "acoustics." A better rendition of that phrase might be, "It is everywhere heard that there is sexual immorality among you." As in everybody knows about this. It's not a secret. You've got something going on that not even pagans put up with.

As I mentioned, Paul calls out the Corinthians' "sexual immorality," or, in Greek, their "porneia." That word may look familiar to you. It's a word we should spend a moment on because it's a term used all throughout the New Testament. Jesus talked about it. The early church talked about it. And Paul talked about it.

“Porneia” was a big deal. What is it exactly? (See the online sermon for illustrations of what Paul and the other New Testament writers thought was morally permissible, anything outside of which was considered “porneia.”)

“Porneia” was happening in the Corinthian church. Sin had entered in, and it began rotting the church from the inside out like termites do to a house. Before we go further in our text, now would be the time to point out that we have sin in our midst, too.

There are places where we are still yet un-disciplined. There are places within all of us where we are unlike Jesus. Whether we like it or not, Jesus wants to confront those places in us and call us up out of them, up out of our sin and into holy living in the Spirit.

For example, there was a time in Jesus’ ministry when Jesus went up on a hillside to preach so that the crowds gathered around him could hear what he was about to say. Jesus stood up and said things like, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom.” To which everyone listening would have been like, “Um. Okay. We’re done for. Those are the most moral, religious guys we know. They follow all the commandments.” But Jesus kept going. He went on to say, “Sure. Some people have the outward things down. The Pharisees and scribes don’t murder or commit adultery or whatever but consider the heart of all the laws we hold dear.” For example, he said, “You have heard that it was said ‘You shall not murder,’ but I say to you, ‘You should not even get unrighteously angry.’” Then he said, “You have heard that it was said ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I say to you, ‘Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’”

There was another moment in Jesus’ ministry when a young, rich man came up to Jesus; he was pretty morally upright, too. He asked Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus told him to keep all the main commandments: “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.” The young guy was like, “Check, check, check—so, it looks like I’m good, right?” Jesus responded, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

Jesus taught the crowds and met this young man in the interior spaces of their lives. He confronted not only the sins they committed on the surface, but also the secret, hidden stuff that we typically try to keep away from God, ourselves, and others.

When you realize that sin isn’t only about the surface level stuff (although it includes that stuff), but it’s also about the inward curvature of our hearts, that we have what the poet W.H. Auden called the “error bred in the bone” and what Dorothy Sayers labeled “a deep interior dislocation at the very center of human personality,” you realize that we’re all complicit.

The Corinthians not only had an INFESTATION of sin, but they TOLERATED the sin in their midst, which compounded the problem. That’s the second thing Paul addressed with the Corinthians: they allowed sin to run rampant in their midst.

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2a, Paul writes, “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. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have gone into mourning...?” Paul says, “There’s sin among you—and you’re PROUD! You should be upset! You should be mourning over the sin in your midst! Instead, you’re apathetic towards it. It doesn’t even faze you! Shouldn’t this break your heart?” Sometimes, however, when you’re around something long enough, it no longer phases you.

One of the first things that hits you when you go to the slums of Kenya is the smell. There's trash everywhere. They don't have showers like we do. People are sweaty and dusty and dirty. There's no indoor plumbing—their sewage system is plastic baggies thrown out their windows. You may think that's gross—and it is, so next time you sit on a toilet, consider yourself fortunate. The place reeks; it doesn't smell good.

Here's the thing though: after a couple hours, you don't notice the smell. You become accustomed. After a while you don't even care. If I'm being honest, there's a part of me that *misses* it.

In the same way, that can be how sin works in our life. When we allow sin to infect us, but we do not do anything about it, we grow accustomed. We acclimate to its presence in our lives, and we think, "No big deal." The reality? We smell.

Here's the thing: we cannot tolerate sin in our lives. In Revelation 2:19-20, Jesus said to the church in Thyatira, "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." It's like if Jesus came to us and said, "Man, Indian Creek—you're really killing it in a lot of ways. You've got great worship. Your children's ministry is phenomenal. You welcome people in. You're a caring church. You're baptizing people. You're serving the community. Phenomenal." But in verse 20, Jesus also said this to Thyatira, "Nevertheless, I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet." Thyatira had a lot going for it, but the church permitted two things: false teaching and false living. Woe to us if one day Jesus looks at us and says, "You had all these great things, but nevertheless I have this against YOU Emerson and YOU church, you *tolerate* sin in your midst."

We can't allow it as a church. And you *cannot* tolerate it in your own life. Why? In verses 6-8 Paul says,

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? 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. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the leavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Scholar Craig Blomberg explains this, saying that these verses "...appeal to the Jews' practice of purifying their homes and their temple from all leavened bread prior to the Passover feast (Exodus 12:15). Paul applies this imagery to the *moral* purity God requires of his new house/temple—the church...He makes it clear that serious sin can infect the whole congregation." Thus, "Thinking of Passover reminds him of Christ as our perfect sacrifice (v. 7)...Jesus' atonement was not intended to free us *to* sin but to liberate us *from* sin." Finally Blomberg notes that, "As he likes to do in many of his letters, Paul thus calls his audience to 'become what they are'—to act according to the way that God has already chosen to consider them in Christ."

What Paul is saying here is that you cannot tolerate your sin because (1) it affects other people whether you realize it or not and (2) because Christ has died for you and liberated you from the POWER of sin and thus the end result of sin which is DEATH.

We *cannot* tolerate sin. That's why Paul's admonition to the Corinthians is to ELIMINATE it. Note what he says in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5:

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. 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? For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. (Emphasis added.)

Paul is saying, “Ok, you’ve got sin in your midst. You’re tolerating it and are unfazed by it. Let me give you a spiritual brake check about it right here, right now. You know how much I love you. You know how much I care for you. You know how much it means to me that you feel loved and valued. And you know that this isn’t just me stating my opinion. You know that this comes from Jesus himself. So, when it comes to your sin, Corinthians, here’s the thing: STOP IT. GET RID OF IT. CUT IT OUT.”

In fact, that’s exactly what Paul says in verse 7: “Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are.”

And then just a little farther down, in verses 9-13, he says,

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

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

I remember in high school watching the movie *Fireproof*. Any of you remember that Kirk Cameron gem? It won awards, like the “Best Feature Film of 2009”—at the San Antonio Independent Christian Film Festival.

Anyways, it’s about this couple and they’re having marital difficulties. They have many issues, but one of them is the husband Caleb’s problem with internet pornography. Because of this, Caleb is on the verge of divorce until something finally clicks in his brain and he discovers a newfound zeal for his wife and marriage. He embarks on this forty-day “Love Dare”—forty days of loving and serving his wife. She’s skeptical. She thinks he’s just trying to come out good in the divorce settlement.

At a certain point in the movie, in the middle of the Love Dare, there’s a moving scene where Caleb has this line in the sand moment. He’s looking at his computer. He’s being tempted. He feels the pull. But miraculously, he doesn’t succumb. Instead, he takes that energy and unplugs the computer, grabs his baseball bat, goes outside, and starts beating the computer into a pulp. Caleb literally eliminates this source of sin in his life.

To what lengths are you willing to go to rid yourself of the sin in your life? Paul says in Romans 6 that the end result of sin is death and the end result of righteousness is sanctification and eternal life. I don’t know what it is you struggle with, but in the words of Jesus, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:29).

So, according to Paul, we have an INFESTATION of sin and we TOLERATE sin, so he calls us to the ELIMINATE of sin, and here’s why: to experience the RESTORATION of our sinful hearts.

It was perhaps easy to miss, but look back with me at verses 4-5: “So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.”

I like Eugene Peterson’s rendering of these verses. He paraphrases them this way:

Assemble the community—I’ll be present in spirit with you and our Master Jesus will be present in power. How this man’s conduct up to public scrutiny. Let him defend it if he can! But if he can’t, then out with him! It will be totally devastating to him, of course, and embarrassing to you. But better devastation and embarrassment than damnation. You want him on his feet and forgiven before the Master on the Day of Judgment.

What Paul is saying here is, “Look I know it’s hard. I know it’s not easy. I know you want to look the other way instead of confronting this guy. And I know that this will be difficult for him to hear. It’ll be devastating actually. But the little embarrassment and shame he feels in the short term is FAR BETTER than the long term consequences!”

You need to do this SO THAT he can at a future point be restored—“so that his Spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord.”

Of course, none of this is possible apart from the work of Christ. Here’s another film illustration for you as we wrap up. Martin Scorsese’s film *Silence* is about some Jesuit (Catholic) priests doing evangelism in Japan during a time when the Japanese authorities were intensely hostile to Japanese Christians, making them renounce Jesus, crucifying Christians, drowning Christians, and so on.

As a sort of side plot throughout the movie, two Jesuit priests that went over for mission work in Japan encounter a Japanese Christian man named Kichijiro, who is painted in the movie as being about as bad a Christian as you can find—constantly drunk, constantly impeding the work of the priests, and most importantly perhaps, constantly renouncing his Christian faith and then repenting and then renouncing his faith over and over again. He’s a repeat apostate.

He, I think, is much like all of us in this life. We hope, we try, we have good intentions. But most certainly, this side of heaven, we fail time and time again. The only saving grace in the movie for Kichijiro is perhaps this: that he repents one more time than he apostatizes. He clings to the saving mercy of God, to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

And that’s where we’re at, too. The call is to live into the life that Christ has freed us to: a life of holy righteousness. But the call is also to latch onto Christ. He entered into our world and went to the very bottom of it. “He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God,” says Paul in his *second* letter to the Corinthians.