

1 Corinthians 5

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[0:00] Well, please turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5, page 954 of the Black Church.

As we continue our journey through this letter, we're really concerned about truth in advertising. When the whole thing of fake news broke a couple of years ago, and that became a phrase that we used, it was particularly egregious to us. We don't like the idea that we're being misled.

Whether it's advertising or anything else, we don't like there to be a mismatch between what someone says and what they do. And we have a trade descriptions act to make sure that companies don't mislead consumers. We want what it says on the packet to match what's inside.

And what we're discovering as we go through this letter of 1 Corinthians is that that should be especially true of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the apostles' criticism that we're beginning to pick up as the letter gathers speed flows from the fact that this is not the case.

[1:10] There is a mismatch. The Corinthian church falls foul of the trade descriptions act because while it might say first Presbyterian church of Corinth over the door, what's inside doesn't resemble a church.

The way they're carrying on is no different, in fact, to other social groups in the city. Well, that's not technically true, is it? Look at verse 1. They're worse. They're more shameful. 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. The chat doing the rounds about the behavior at first Pres even makes the pagans blush. Rivalry and factions, we've heard about that. That's not great, but sleeping with your father's wife, your stepmother. And the tense of the verbs suggest that this is ongoing and it is widely known in the church. He's doing it, he's not ashamed of it, and everybody knows about it. That's a whole different level of wrong, even in the very sexually loose Corinthian culture. I think it's probably the same today. If I think about even my wildest friends, friends that I have that are the least morally bothered, if one of them said, you know, we're out socially or something and they say, you know, I've been seeing my dad's wife, I think the response would be, sorry? That's filthy. You've got to cut that out. That's not okay. Even amongst the most morally, least morally bothered of the people that I know. Pagans wouldn't have it, but no one in the leadership at First Presby's Corinth seems bothered. They're actually, verse 2, do you see, arrogant. Verse 6, they're boasting about it. I'm not actually sure what this boasting looks like, but I suspect that it's along the lines that they are proud that they don't judge anyone. They're a church that loves everybody because, you know, God is love and he accepts you on your terms. Here at First Presby's

Corinth, we're all into grace. It's the same spirit that we saw last week, where what God wants is actually sidelined in favor of a cultural permissiveness. But the irony here is that in their attempt to be relevant and accessible and down with what's cool in Corinth, they've made themselves a disgrace, an embarrassment in the eyes of those same people. And we see a bit of that same sort of thing in our day. We see churches that are falling over themselves to accommodate sexual behavior that is unnatural. As the Church of England goes out of its way to glorify that which God says is inglorious, the watching world is starting to say, hang on a minute, isn't the church supposed to be the church? Non-Christian journalists, Melanie Phillips, Julie Burchill, I've read both of them. They've both been critics of these changes that are afoot, changes that we would read redefine what marriage is in the life of the church. And among my secular friends, my most liberal friends, while they'd not say it in company, of course, for fear of being canceled, not allowed to be heard to say it in public, in private, they'll be critical of the redefining of marriage in the church. They've got no love for the church, but what they can see very clearly is that the church's lame attempts to get cultural approval are exactly that. They're lame and they shouldn't bother. They want the church to

be the church. And the church should be unashamed to behave in line with what that means. And Paul says it doesn't mean accommodating sin in your midst and certainly not being proud of it. Now, what's interesting, well, actually, there are lots of interesting things. One of the most striking things is that Paul doesn't rebuke this man for the behavior. He rebukes the church. Verse 2, you there is plural. He's saying you, plural, congregation, are arrogant.

The congregation is cheering. They should be ashamed. They're boasting. They should be horrified. Because when the sign over the door says church, the community inside should look like a church.

They should look distinctive from the world around them. Holy. Holy means set apart, set apart for God. Ordering our lives according to what God says, not what the watching world says. That underpins all that Paul says in this chapter. In fact, I think it probably underpins all that he's saying through to the end of chapter 7. And this is why they are to act decisively to address the sin in their midst.

[5:52] You see the thread that runs all the way through. Verse 2, have a look. Verse 2, let him who has done this be removed from among you. Verse 5, deliver this man over to Satan. We'll say more about that in a moment. Verse 11, do not associate with them. Verse 13, purge the evil person from among you.

We're not left in any doubt about what needs to happen. But where does this ethical standard come from? Is this an arbitrary thing that Paul has decided to make up? Why is it that this course of action, pushing the person out as it were, why is this the course of action that he is promoting? Well, it's an application of the Old Testament holiness code in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Leviticus 18 verse 8, you shall not have sexual relations with your father's wife. It's the exact phrase that Paul uses. Deuteronomy 27 verse 20 forbids a father and a son to share the same woman. And the repeated mention of the phrase among you, verse 1 and verse 13 here, strongly echoes passages in Deuteronomy where Moses calls for the removal of sin among the people of God.

Paul applies the Old Testament law to the New Testament church because the church is in continuity with the Old Testament people of God as it relates to holiness, the requirement for holiness.

So purge the sin from among you, he's saying, because of God's desire for his people to be holy. It's the same desire he's had from the very beginning all the way through the Bible story.

[7:30] They are to practice what has become known as church discipline. When the church gathers, do you see verse 4, that is when the Lord Jesus is present in power by his Holy Spirit.

And they are to act in that context to put this man out of their fellowship. The church, under the oversight of her elders, acts in this case as God's agent to pronounce his verdict on that person. Now, does this sound strange? I suspect this sounds a bit strange to many of us. We're thinking, are we not supposed to be trying to bring people into the church, not putting them out?

And who would want to hand anybody over to Satan? That language sounds pretty extreme. Apart from anything else, is it not a bit judgmental to talk in these ways? Surely we're all sinners.

Why do some get put out and others don't? Well, I hope what follows will make clear, will answer those questions, because Paul makes clear that the whole process, all that he's talking about here, is motivated by three concerns. Three concerns. In fact, they are concerns that are echoed by our book of church order in the IPC. Here's a line from our book of church order. The ends of church discipline are threefold. The glory of God, the peace and purity of the church, and the restoration of wayward members. That's what is plainly here in 1 Corinthians 5. So, first concern. Why should this person be put out of the congregation? The first concern is for God's glory. For God's glory. Paul has already told us, God's people are the temple of his Holy Spirit. Chapter 3, verse 16.

Corporately, the church is the place where God especially dwells on earth, and the presence of this kind of sin profanes his temple.

Now, of course, we are all sinners. We confess that fact together every Sunday morning. We've done it already today. And we don't do this as a superficial thing. We mean it when we say it. We confess that our sin runs through our thoughts as well as our words and our deeds. There is no part of any human being that is not tainted in some way by sin. It runs all the way through us. So, when we confess our sins, we're serious about it. We're not messing about. We're not pretending. So,

how do you decide what sins require the level of action that Paul is talking about here? Should someone be disciplined for pride, for example, or laziness? Well, if we read on, Paul actually tells us which sins qualify for this level of action. Do you see verse 11? But now I'm writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of a brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler, not even to eat with such a one. So, there they are. Sexual immorality or greed. Now, he's brought those together actually here, the apostle, and I think he has a kind of greed that has a sexual element to it. Someone who indulges their appetites insatiably for sexual sin. An idolater, someone who is in an obvious way committed to a false god. A reviler, what that means is someone who speaks with contempt about other people. Their nasty, malicious speech characterizes the way they live. Drunkard, their drinking is out of control. And a swindler, somebody who's dishonest with money, technically they're stealing from other people. It's the eighth commandment. Now, what is it about these sins? Why does he list these ones? Well, first of all, they're obvious. That's one of the difficulties with disciplining for something like, say, pride. [11:15] It's not always obvious. These are obvious. You know when you're doing them, and other people know as well. But these sins also do particular damage to both the one in sin and the one who is sinned against. So, they have an effect beyond the person. But the main reason Paul chooses this list is, again, because they are the vices listed back in Deuteronomy as particularly offensive to God.

It is an application of the Old Testament Holiness Code. That is why these are the sins that warrant exclusion from the community. The fornicator is addressed in Deuteronomy 22. The idolater in Deuteronomy 17.

The malicious talker is addressed in chapter 19. The drunkard in chapter 21. And the thief in chapter 24. It's all there in Deuteronomy. And Paul is taking that, and he's applying it into the life of the church.

These are the sins that God says are particularly profane, and that's why they have no place inside his church. If it says church over the door, these sins need to be addressed.

Now, let me be clear, and especially so if you're not a Christian, if you're not somebody who is following the Lord Jesus. Paul is at pains here, in verses 9 and 10 in particular, to clarify who it is that he's talking about. This is not a judgment on those outside the church or how they choose to live. The church doesn't have authority in that realm. That's between you and God, verse 13.

[12:48] Paul is talking about those who profess to be Christian. Verse 11, you see someone who is a brother, and yet they persist proudly in their scandalous sin. Can you see that? It's really important that we're clear about that. If this man were to repent, whatever he's done, he wouldn't need to be put out of the fellowship. Again, it's really important to see this. This isn't about people in the life of the church going around sniffing out some sort of generic sin in someone's life, or second-guessing whether or not they're genuinely repentant when they say that they are.

This person is unrepentant, and they glory in their sin. The church is not made up of sinless people who sit self-righteously above everyone else.

Where that happens, actually, there's a similar problem with advertising standards. The problem is just run the other way. The church is not made up of self-righteous people who stand above others and look down on them. If you see yourself as a sinner, you belong here. And here's the most important thing that you need to know. Here it is. Every sin, even the scandalous ones on this list, can be forgiven. However you have spent your life up to now, look at verse 7, Christ, our Passover lamb, was sacrificed. What that means is that the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross to pay for every sin that you may have committed, even the ones that you are most ashamed of, even the ones that the culture around us might look on and say, that's a scandalous thing to do. The Lord Jesus paid for those sins on the cross, and he turned away the wrath of God. And what that means is that if you turn from that sin and you put your faith in him, you will be forgiven, cleansed, restored, made new. The church is always composed of sinners. God has nothing else to work with. But we are repentant sinners. And the criteria for sins worthy of excommunication are that they are obvious, public, disgraceful, and unrepentant. Obvious, we can see it's going on. The person is unrepentant, and it's public and disgraceful. In this case, Paul says, God has given the church the

authority to put them out, and we do that first and foremost out of a concern for his glory. That's our first concern, God's glory. Our second concern, then, Paul says, should be the man's salvation. The BCO, the restoration of wayward members. Verse 4, 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. The language here is about as arresting as it gets. Who wants to think that they are handing someone over to the devil? But delivering the man over to Satan is synonymous here with removing him from the believing community. Paul is obviously emphasizing here how serious this sin is. It puts you outside the community of the Spirit, cut off from the protection of the Lord and his people, leaving you vulnerable to Satan's forces. The very thing that Paul says in Colossians 1 verse 13, the Christians have been rescued from. Verses 7 and 8, when Paul talks about Passover, this was an event in Israel's history where the people killed the lamb and daubed the blood on the doorposts of their homes and sheltered inside, protected from God's anger as God passed over. When the man is put out of the church, it's like he no longer has the protection of the lamb and is at Satan's mercy. And because Satan has zero mercy, in fact he loves to destroy people, it is a frightening place to be. But don't miss the intent. Look, verse 5, deliver this man to Satan, put him out into the realm where Satan has remit for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. One of the goals of the whole thing is that the sinner will come to his senses. He will wake up to what he's done, wake up to what he has lost, and repent of the sin, and come back to salvation. The destruction of the flesh is bringing the man to the end of himself, whether that's physical through the consequences of his immorality, or emotionally through the guilt and shame that eventually haunts everyone who gives themselves away to this kind of life. But when they lie in their hospital bed, or when they wake in terror in the night, if they call out to him, Christ will meet them. He will meet them there, and in the midst of their destruction, he will bring them to glory.

[17:55] If they were allowed to stay in the church, they could deceive themselves that God was okay with what they were doing, and they could live in that delusion. But the point is that when they are then put out, they see that repentance is needed. And when anyone repents, whoever they are and whatever they've done, God is always merciful. He will receive us, and he will find in our favor on the last day. When the church doesn't act in this way, it gives that person permission to persist in their sin. Because what we're saying as a church is that God is fine with this scandalous behavior.

It's absolutely fine that you can carry on like that and remain within the community of the people of God. Churches that do this are profoundly unkind. To mislead someone in this way is an egregious thing to do. It's egregious in itself because of what the Bible says here, but it is the most unloving thing that we can do. You've probably heard there's lots of talk of something called spiritual abuse these days.

And it is the case that a Christian leader who uses their authority to manipulate people in their care is abusive. But to let someone persist unchallenged in their sin is the highest form of spiritual abuse. For those who have been entrusted to shepherd the flock of God, to care so little about someone's eternal state that you stand back while they self-destruct is heartless, it is callous, and such a minister should be fired immediately. So, however shocking we find this language, and it is shocking, I want us to see that there is mercy in church discipline. Because it always has restoration as part of its goal. Part of the goal of the hard conversation, the awkwardness that inevitably follows in the life of the church, and the decision to put that person out, part of the goal is that this person will repent and come back to God, that they will be restored, that they will receive His mercy.

If we were in this situation here, we wouldn't simply cut the person off. We would plead with them to start with, to repent of their sin. We would be praying as a church that God would change their hearts. Galatians 6, if anyone is caught in any transgressions, you who are spiritual, restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Like a rebellious child, our posture toward them would be brokenhearted. Repent of your sin. Don't go on living like this. It is so destructive to you and to other people. But we wouldn't stand back and watch them blow themselves and others around them to spiritual smithereens. We wouldn't do that. We want them back. But in the end, that must be left to God,

because the final concern that Paul expresses, church discipline, first he says, is for God's glory. [20:52] Secondly, it is for the man's salvation. And then thirdly, it is for the church's protection. What we say in the BCO, the peace and purity of the church. Verse 6, you're boasting. It's not good.

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump as you really are unleavened. Paul describes the potent effect that a tiny bit of yeast can have on a batch of dough. I've taken over in our house some of the time making the pizza dough at the weekend. I know how this works. I can tell you firsthand, I know how this works. You put a small sachet into the flour and all the mix and it goes through the whole thing and it all expands.

Paul is concerned that if left unchecked, sin will spread like that yeast and wreak havoc across the church. That is how things work in any group. In a team environment, when one person starts cutting corners in training, others follow their lead. In work, when one or two people start playing with the expense account, others do it too. And here, if one guy is celebrating his promiscuity as an expression of his freedom in Christ and nothing is done about it, well, why not me too?

One commentator puts it like this, Paul fears the dire consequences that will ensue if the church tolerates such wickedness. It contaminates the whole community with a moral blight that will surely destroy it. So what he's doing is, he's saying, yes, we're concerned about God's glory. We really want this person back. We want them to be saved in the end, but we also really care about the protection of the whole body. Church discipline is like the church's immune system.

If it is functioning, the church will be healthy. If it is suppressed or absent, the church will get sick and eventually die. Our national church currently has no immune system, so it is dying.

[22:52] And it happens the way bankruptcy happens. First of all, it's slow and then all at once. And every church has a responsibility to keep her immunity strong in order to be the church, in order to be the distinctive people that God has called us to be. Paul returns to his motivation, Luke, verses 7 and 8 again, with reference to this Feast of Unleavened Bread where the Jewish people would remember the exodus by getting rid of all the leaven, all the yeast in their homes. They did this as a reminder of the Lord's rescue of them from slavery in Egypt and as a symbol of them leaving their old life behind. And Paul is saying to the Corinthians, although mainly Gentile, the audience, they must have known this story. He's saying, look, you've left the old leaven of your sin behind, so live like that is true. Purge sin from your midst. Don't let it take hold in the community.

That's not who you are. It will spread and you're out of step with who you claim to be. And that takes us back to where we started. When the sign above the door says, church, we must make sure that the community inside matches up. What should we see? We should see a group of people who, whilst not perfect, do care about God's glory and who take unrepentant sin in their midst seriously and who act in faith in such a way that protects one another. And in so doing, adorns the reputation of Jesus Christ to the world, God really, really cares about His church.

He cares about the reputation of the church in the culture. He cares about His own glory. He cares about our salvation, but He cares as well about the reputation of the church in the world so that the church might be a light in the darkness, that it might be a city on the hill that people are drawn to and that they find their salvation in. May God help us to be such a place. Let's pray.