

Chapter 7: Cleansing the Church

1 Corinthians 5:1–13

As Paul hinted at the end of 1 Corinthians 4, there is a specific issue that is forcing Paul to come “with a rod” for discipline (1 Cor. 4:21). A man in the Corinthian church is reportedly sinning incestuously with his father’s wife, a kind of sexual immorality that the pagan Gentiles themselves would not even tolerate (1 Cor. 5:1). While the Corinthians go on boasting about their spiritual wisdom and power, Paul finds this festering, putrid issue in their midst. Rather than turning a blind eye to the situation, Paul addresses it immediately.

What, though, is the big deal? Why not focus on other issues that he could tackle within the Corinthian church? What drives Paul to deal with this concern when the Corinthians themselves clearly do not care to do anything about it? In this chapter, Paul lays out the imperative for cleansing the church of the immorality in its midst. Even a small amount of old, sinful leaven can contaminate the whole church, so Paul insists that the church must take the radical step immediately of excommunicating this man from their midst. In this chapter, we see that *the Lord Jesus commands excommunication to sanctify his church and to save unrepentant sinners.*

Sexual Immorality in the Church (1 Cor. 5:1–5)

Although 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 contains many translation difficulties, the general sense of the passage is abundantly clear. These difficulties begin in the very first Greek word in the passage, which the ESV, NASB, CSB, and NIV all translate the word as “actually,” suggesting Paul’s shock at the overall situation.¹ On the other hand, since the word often refers to the totality or universality of something,² other translations have “commonly” (KJV) or “widely” (HCSB) or “everywhere” (LEB). In context, this word could also mean “in short” or “in one word,” which would transition well from Paul’s statement about bringing a rod for discipline in 1 Corinthians 4:21 to the charge Paul brings about the need for discipline here in 1 Corinthians 5:1.³

Regardless of the exact nuance of the first word, Paul’s message is clear: he is horrified at the

¹ “On the basis of the opening adverb and the verb, some have argued that Paul intends “it is universally reported,” and that the horror rests in how widely this thing is known. But Paul’s use of this adverb later in the letter (6:7 and 15:29) indicates that it moves closer to the idea of “altogether,” hence “actually.” The horror lies not just in the fact that there is sexual immorality among them, but that they are taking no action.” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 218–19.)

² The word “catholic,” meaning “universal,” comes in part from this word: *kath* (“according to”) *holōs* (“the whole”).

³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 156. Citing R. St. J. Parry, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Greek Testament (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1926), 86.

reports that have come to him from among the Corinthians. The word for sexual immorality (*porneia*) broadly encompasses all kinds of sexual sins, although Paul specifies the exact nature of the crime committed in Corinth.⁴ Some man has entered into an ongoing sexual relationship with his stepmother (“his father’s wife”), a sin that is specifically forbidden in Leviticus 18:8.⁵ It is also possible that the language of “having” this woman suggests a marriage (cf. Matt. 14:4; 22:28; 1 Cor. 7:2, 29), and, if 2 Corinthians 7:12 is referring to the same situation, it is possible that the man’s father was still alive.⁶

Although the Corinthians would have been *Gentile* converts to Christianity, Paul condemns this sin using the language of the Mosaic law concerning marriage (Lev. 18:8; 20:11; Deut. 22:30; 27:20) and refers to the fact that not even *Gentiles* (*ethnesin*; ESV: “pagans”; cf. 1 Cor. 1:23) would tolerate such a thing. That is, Paul does not classify the Corinthian church as Gentiles any longer. On this issue, Richard Hays alerts us to the striking point that Paul is so subtly making: “Now that they are in Christ, they belong to the covenant people of God, and their behavior should reflect that new status.”⁷ God’s revealed will about sexual purity in Leviticus 18 were not ceremonial laws for the Jews that were abolished in Christ; rather, the Mosaic laws of sexual purity remain binding as permanent expositions and applications of the 7th Commandment for Christians living today.⁸

Tolerating Sin (1 Cor. 5:2)

As bad as this sin is, Paul is even more concerned about the lack of response by the Corinthians. Rather than mourning the sin in their midst, they are arrogant (lit., “puffed up”; cf. 1 Cor. 4:6, 18, 19). Although some have understood Paul to mean that the Corinthians are arrogant *because* of this sin, it is far better to understand that they are arrogant *in spite of* this sin.⁹ They believe that they are wise and strong, and yet they tolerate such a reprehensible sin in their midst! As Gordon Fee writes, “It is this lack both of a sense of sin, and therefore of any ethical consequences to their life in the Spirit, that marks the Corinthian brand of ‘spirituality’ as radically different from that which flows out of the gospel of Christ crucified.”¹⁰

1 Corinthians 5:2 gives us two important principles regarding the practice of church discipline today. First, Paul reveals the correct response to discovering sin in the midst of our churches: mourning. If God has shaped our hearts to see sin the way that he sees it, reports of sin should cause us to experience “grief over the devil’s success, sorrow for our congregation because it suffers such

⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 81.

⁵ “The problem is incest, a man taking a wife of his father other than his own mother and ‘having’ her sexually in an ongoing relationship. This is made clear from two points of usage: (1) The language of ‘father’s wife’ is taken directly from the LXX of Lev. 18:7–8, where this specific sin is forbidden; and (2) the verb ‘to have,’ when used in sexual or marital contexts, is a euphemism for an ongoing sexual relationship, not just a passing fancy or a ‘one-night stand.’” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 219–20.)

⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 81.

⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 81.

⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 81–82.

⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 160–63.

¹⁰ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 223.

disgrace, mourning for the soul of the sinner who has been overwhelmed with sin and guilt.”¹¹ Second, Paul’s reaction teaches us that church discipline—even to the point of excommunication—is a necessary, righteous, and loving action to take in response to the sinner.¹² Church discipline is loving toward the sinner, as we shall see, but, more importantly, church action is critical for the “health and integrity of the church as a corporate body....consequently, the community must act to preserve its unity and its identity as the sanctified people of God (cf. 1:2).”¹³ Such a sin is incompatible with the holiness of God and the holiness of God’s people.¹⁴

Initiating Discipline (1 Cor. 5:3–5)

Since this unrepentant sinner belongs to the church at Corinth, he is under their jurisdiction, and they bear the responsibility to discipline him. The Corinthians have not acted, however, so Paul himself initiates the use of the rod (1 Cor. 4:21) for church discipline from a distance (1 Cor. 5:3–5).¹⁵ Paul acknowledges that he is absent in body, but, as one present in spirit, he declares that he has already pronounced judgment on the sinner (1 Cor. 5:3). Still, this is not a task that Paul could do alone, but an action that the whole church must take together.¹⁶ While this general principle is clear, there are four major translation and interpretation difficulties that we must work through.

First, it is difficult to understand exactly where “in the name of the Lord Jesus” fits in the the context of v. 3–4. The strict word order of the passage runs like this: “[3] ...already I have judged as present the one who has done such a thing as this [4] *in the name of the our Lord Jesus* you being gathered and my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus...” (my translation). Now, unless the man was claiming some bizarre theological justification for his sin (unlikely), we can rule out the possibility of connecting “in the name of our Lord Jesus” with the action itself.¹⁷ So, the first major

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 208.

¹² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 181–82. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xii.i.html>>

¹³ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 80.

¹⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 222–23.

¹⁵ In the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a similar principle governs church discipline cases today. Church members are under the jurisdiction of their local Sessions, and pastors (teaching elders) are under the jurisdiction of their local Presbyteries. In instances where Sessions or Presbyteries will not discipline members under their jurisdiction in cases of scandal or heresy, two other Sessions within the same Presbytery may request the Presbytery to assume jurisdiction over a church member (BCO 33–1), or two other Presbyteries may request the General Assembly to assume jurisdiction over a pastor (BCO 34–1). In such cases, it would be better for the church with original jurisdiction to act (as in Corinth), but when the church of original jurisdiction does not act, other courts can act from afar to initiate discipline processes to address the scandal in those churches.

¹⁶ “It is a right inherent in every society, and necessary for its existence, to judge of the qualifications of its own members; to receive those whom it judges worthy, and to exclude the unworthy. This right is here clearly recognized as belonging to the church. It is also clear from this passage that this right belongs to each particular church or congregation. The power was vested in the church of Corinth, and not in some officer presiding over that church. The bishop or pastor was not reprovved for neglect of discipline; but the church itself, in its organized capacity.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 83.)

¹⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 165–66.

translation option is to connect the phrase “in the name of our Lord Jesus” to Paul’s action of judgment in v. 3: “...I have already passed judgment *in the name of our Lord Jesus* on the one who has been doing this” (NIV). The second major option is to see the phrase “in the name of our Lord Jesus” as referring to the assembly in v. 4: “When you are assembled *in the name of the Lord Jesus...*” (ESV). For two reasons, it is probably best to take the latter interpretation, as the ESV has it: (1) the word “assembled” is closer in the sentence to “in the name of the Lord Jesus” than the word “judged”; and (2) Paul seems to be alluding to Jesus’ classic statement on church discipline from Matthew 18, which closes with the same words: “For where two or three are *gathered in my name*, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20).¹⁸

Second, in what sense is Paul’s “spirit present” with the church” (1 Cor. 5:4)? Paul readily acknowledges his bodily absence, but he makes just as strong of a claim that he will be with them “in spirit” when they assemble in the name of the Lord Jesus. Charles Hodge lays down the minimum of what this phrase must mean when he writes that this “does not mean simply that he was present in mind, as thinking of them and interested in their welfare; but it was a presence of knowledge, authority, and power.”¹⁹ Beyond this idea, however, Paul may be referring not exclusively to *his* spirit but to the *Holy Spirit*, as the word may refer to either spirit. Thus, Gordon Fee may capture a broader, spiritual sense of this phrase: “...in a way that is not altogether clear to us he understood himself actually to be present ‘in spirit/Spirit’ in the gathered community....he is indeed present by way of the Spirit, and that is *why* he can act as he does.”²⁰

Third, the precise meaning has been debated regarding Paul’s statement about handing this man over to Satan for the destruction of his *flesh*, in order that his *spirit* may be saved in the day of the Lord. There are essentially two interpretations: “According to one view, it means simply excommunication; according to the other, it includes a miraculous subjection of the person to the power of Satan.”²¹ If the first view, then the destruction of the flesh refers to the expelling someone from the visible church and putting him, outwardly (according to the “flesh”) to the kingdom of Satan, in order that his spirit may be prompted to repentance. If the second view, then the destruction of the flesh refers to some kind of bodily afflictions and trials through which the man will be saved. In my judgment, the first view is stronger for two reasons: (1) the Bible never teaches that someone may be saved by their own physical, bodily suffering, but only through the faith in the person and work of Jesus who suffered and rose again in our place;²² and (2) the immediate context of this letter shows that Paul has contrasted the flesh against the spirit in an ethical, spiritual sense (1 Cor. 3:1).²³ Thus, the sinner is handed over to Satan by excommunication in order that he may come to recognize the severity of his sin and repent from it in order to be saved.

Pronouncing the Censure of Excommunication Publicly

¹⁸ For the two major interpretation options outlined in this paragraph, as well as these arguments for supporting the ESV version, see Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 110–11.

¹⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 84.

²⁰ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 224.

²¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 85.

²² Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 111–12.

²³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 175–76.

Fourth, why exactly does Paul ask the Corinthians to assemble? We can only answer this question after answering the previous three, to ascertain that (1) the Corinthians were to assemble in the name of the Lord, (2) that Paul was spiritually present to pronounce the judgment, and (3) that the judgment pronounced was excommunication. This passage demonstrates Paul's refusal to act unilaterally in this excommunication, and only in the assembled church. Still, we should also notice that Paul alone pronounces the sentence of excommunication without seeking the *input* or *deliberations* of the whole church on this matter. Indeed, Paul chastises the church for failing to act, but, rather than referring the case back to the Corinthians, Paul pronounces a verdict against the sinner without any further delay.

How, then, do we put together the tension between Paul's unilateral judgment and Paul's refusal to pronounce the judgment apart from the assembled church? The best answer seems to be to recognize that the church was assembled as "mere spectators."²⁴ John Calvin puts it this way in his *Institutes*:

Paul's course of action for excommunicating a man is the lawful one, provided the elders do not do it by themselves alone, but with the knowledge and approval of the church; in this way the multitude of the people does not decide the action but observes as witness and guardian so that nothing may be done according to the whim of a few.²⁵

The final processes of church discipline are lawfully exercised by the officers in Christ's church who have been entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of binding and loosing (cf. Matt. 18:15–20). As Paul lawfully judged the offender, so now elders are called to administer Christ's rule in the church by discipline (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17). Nevertheless, the censure of excommunication should be administered publicly, before the whole church: "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (1 Tim. 5:20). In this way, excommunication may be done with the consent and approval of the whole congregation, even if the judgments of discipline are handled by the elders.²⁶

²⁴ "The church was to be convened, and Paul spiritually present. The sentence was not to be passed or executed in secret, but openly. It was to have the solemnity of a judicial proceeding, and, therefore, the people were convened, though they were merely spectators." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 84.)

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), Book IV, Ch. XII, § 7, p. 1235.

²⁶ "As, however, a multitude never accomplishes anything with moderation or seriousness, if not governed by counsel, there was appointed in the ancient Church a Presbytery, that is, an assembly of elders, who, by the consent of all, had the power of first judging in the case. From them the matter was brought before the people, but it was as a thing already judged of. Whatever the matter may be, it is quite contrary to the appointment of Christ and his Apostles — to the order of the Church, and even to equity itself, that this right should be put into the hands of any one man, of excommunicating at his pleasure any that he may choose. Let us take notice, then, that in excommunicating this limitation be observed — that this part of discipline be exercised by the common counsel of the elders, and with the consent of the people, and that this is a remedy in opposition to tyranny. For nothing is more at variance with the discipline of Christ than tyranny, for which you open a wide door, if you give one man the entire power." (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 183. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xii.i.html>>)

Cleanse out the Old Leaven (1 Cor. 5:6–8)

Only after Paul has outlined this course of action for the Corinthian church to excommunicate the unrepentant sinner does he explain why this action is so important. Earlier, Paul rebuked the Corinthians for being “arrogant” (1 Cor. 5:2), and now he tells them flatly their their boasting is “not good” (1 Cor. 5:6). As earlier, it is highly unlikely that the Corinthians were arrogant and boasting *because* of this sin, but rather they are exalting themselves above others *in spite of* this sin.²⁷ Finally, then, we come to the reason for Paul’s serious concern, as Paul chidingly reminds them (“Do you not know...?”) that even a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough (1 Cor. 5:6; cf. Gal. 5:9). What, though, does this expression mean?

Contaminated Leaven (1 Cor. 5:6)

Jesus himself used leaven for various parables and illustrations, sometimes symbolizing *good* (e.g., the kingdom of God; Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20–21), and other times symbolizing *evil* (e.g., the leaven of the Pharisees; Matt. 16:6; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1). The reason that leaven works so well to illustrate these very diverse concepts has to do with the ability of even a very small amount of leaven to diffuse itself throughout the dough.²⁸ Just as the kingdom of God, the teaching of Pharisees, and unrepentant sin can work its way through all of God’s people (whether for good or for evil), so also a little leaven works its way to leaven the whole lump.

That said, we modern readers should be careful to understand the difference between leaven and yeast.²⁹ Yeast is a fresh, clean ingredient that we add to bread to make it rise, but yeast was not readily accessible in Paul’s day. Instead, leaven was made by setting aside “a little” of the dough made the previous week and allowing that dough to ferment. That aged, fermented dough, would then be mixed into the fresh dough, where the little bit of leaven would leaven the whole lump, causing it to rise. Then, a portion of that batch of dough was set aside so the process could start again. Over time, the leaven could become moldy, corrupted, and contaminated, increasingly so from batch to bath. As Garland writes, “The only way to break the chain of baking bacteria-laden bread was to ditch the whole batch and start afresh.”³⁰ Allowing this sinful man to remain in the presence of the church is like continuing to bake with contaminated leaven.

Living as New Dough (1 Cor. 5:7–8)

So, Paul urges the Corinthians to cleanse out the old leaven in order to be a “new” lump. In v. 7–8, Paul appeals to the Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. On the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month, Israel celebrated Passover, beginning with the Passover sacrifice (Ex. 12:1–13; Lev. 23:5). From that evening onward for the next seven days, beginning with the Passover sacrifice, Israel could eat only unleavened bread (Ex. 12:18–19). The next day (the fifteenth of the month), the Feast of Unleavened Bread officially commenced (Lev. 23:6). During the seven days of the duration of those feasts, the Israelites were to purge all the leaven from their houses and eat only fresh, unleavened bread.³¹ Anyone who ate unleavened bread was to be excommunicated: “If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the

²⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 178.

²⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 86.

²⁹ For this paragraph, see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 236–37.

³⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 179.

³¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 91.

congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land” (Ex. 12:19).

Paul’s application of the old covenant feasts to the new covenant people of God is breathtaking. He insists that Christ, our Passover, has already been slain (1 Cor. 5:7). Most significantly, this refers to the fact that the blood of the Passover sacrifice protected Israel from God’s wrath as he passed through Egypt for judgment. In the same way, the blood of Christ now protects us from God’s wrath of judgment against the world.³² Beyond that, the Passover sacrifice also signifies that the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread have *already* begun! *We*, though, are the unleavened bread of the feast: “you really are unleavened” (1 Cor. 5:7). Therefore, Paul urges us to celebrate the feast by ridding ourselves of the old leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:8). We must live as a “new” lump (1 Cor. 5:7)—that is, as those who have absolutely new natures that we have received through faith in Christ.³³ By the “old leaven,” Paul means the *flesh* (1 Cor. 3:1–3), the corruption of the old man (Rom. 6:6).³⁴

This does not mean that we purge malice and evil from our midst in order to *become* the unleavened people of God. Rather, we have been made into new, unleavened bread by Christ’s sacrifice. Or, as many point out, Paul rests the *imperative* of celebrating the feast upon the *indicative* of Christ’s sacrifice for us, and not the other way around.³⁵ Our calling, then, is to live holy, unleavened lives of sincerity and truth, being careful to keep out any of the old leaven of malice and evil from our lives and our churches.³⁶ Paul writes “let us celebrate” in the present tense, which gives an ongoing sense to the command.³⁷ Where the Israelites celebrated this feast one per year, year after year, Christ has been sacrificed once-for-all, and we are called to *keep* keeping the feast *continually*.³⁸

Purge the Evil Person from Among You (1 Cor. 5:9–13)

³² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 87.

³³ “In the purpose clause: ‘in order that you may be a new lump,’ we should note the adjective νέος which means ‘new’ in the sense that the thing did not exist before while καινός means ‘new’ in the sense that a thing differs from what is old. Both terms are used with reference to our new Christian nature in Eph. 4:23, 24. Here Paul says that the Corinthians are not merely to be a lump that is ‘new’ in so far as they differed from what they once were, but ‘new’ in a sense in which they had not before been. They are to be a lump of dough that is just freshly mixed, to which nothing in the way of yeast has been added. Their Christian character and life are to be like an entirely fresh start. He might also have used the other word: new and no longer old, and this, too, would have been pertinent; but he prefers the word νέος because it is stronger.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 220–21.)

³⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 187–88. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xii.ii.html>>

³⁵ e.g., Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 114.

³⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 238.

³⁷ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 91.

³⁸ “The lamb, then, was sacrificed yearly; then followed a feast, the celebration of which lasted for seven successive days. *Christ*, says Paul, is our *Passover*. He was sacrificed once, and on this condition, that the efficacy of that one oblation should be everlasting. What remains now is, that we eat, not once a-year, but continually.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 188–89. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xii.ii.html>>

In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul suddenly mentions a previous letter, which we apparently no longer have. God did not intend for the whole church through the ages to preserve every letter Paul wrote as Scripture, but only the specific number of letters that we still have.³⁹ In that lost letter, Paul instructed the Corinthians “not to associate with sexually immoral people” (1 Cor. 5:9). Outside of 1 Corinthians 5:9 and 11, the word “associate” only appears in one other context: “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and *have nothing to do with him*, that he may be ashamed” (2 Thess. 3:14). Thus, this word refers to close fellowship reserved for those within the church.⁴⁰ If a professing Christian refuses to repent of his or her sin (whether of sexual immorality or, as in 2 Thessalonians, being idle or a busybody), that Christian must lose their close fellowship with the rest of the church until they do repent.

In the World, Not Of the World (1 Cor. 5:9–10)

The Corinthians, however, seem to have misunderstood Paul’s intention. They believed that Paul’s concern was merely that they should separate from the world. Paul dismisses this idea by observing that they would have to depart from the world altogether if they wanted to do that. Christians could not realistically avoid general social and business interactions with unbelieving sinners within this world.⁴¹ Certainly, Christians should be careful about their interactions with the world, since we must not take part in the world’s sin (cf. 1 Cor. 10:19–21), and so that we should be *in*, but not *of* the world (cf. John 17:15–16).⁴² Indeed, bad company corrupts good character (1 Cor. 15:33). Nevertheless, we could never avoid *all* interactions with worldly sinners. Moreover, even if we could avoid such interactions, that is not what Paul is recommending. Paul is seeking the holiness of the church, and, as Richard Hays observes, the “holiness of the church is a matter of its internal discipline and integrity, not of its separateness from the world.”⁴³

Paul’s point, then, is not so much that the church must diligently, relentlessly separate herself from the world. To be sure, the church must be separated from worldliness (“*of* the world”), but the church must always remain *in* the world. Instead, Paul’s point is that the church must separate herself from professing believers who unrepentantly fail to live up to their profession. By removing the unrepentant from the rolls of the church, the church “notifies both the offender and the world that the Christian’s God does not tolerate such defilement and thereby safeguards God’s honor and credibility so that the name of God is not blasphemed in the world because of their crimes (Rom. 2:24; cf. Isa. 52:5; Ezek. 36:20).”⁴⁴ The church must not tolerate even a little leaven within her midst.

Corrupting Sins (1 Cor. 5:11)

Paul gives two lists of sins in this paragraph: a shorter list in v. 10, and then an expanded form of the same list in v. 11. Why the two lists? In the first list in v. 10, Paul expands the scope of dangerous, corrupting sins beyond the specific case of sexual immorality that he has been addressing,

³⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 224–25.

⁴⁰ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 243.

⁴¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 88–89.

⁴² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 244.

⁴³ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 87.

⁴⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 185.

adding the greedy, the swindlers, and the idolaters. The word *greedy* refers to those who are “covetous” (KJV), “and especially those who defraud for the sake of gain.”⁴⁵ Elsewhere, this word appears to describe “defrauding” someone by taking that person’s spouse adulterously (1 Thess. 4:6). In 2 Corinthians, Paul uses this word three times to insist that he never “took advantage” of anyone at Corinth—not meaning by sexual immorality (although that would be included), but *taking advantage* in a general sense (2 Cor. 7:2; 12:17, 18). Thus, this word for greedy/covetous refers primarily to the *desire* or the *willingness* to transgress boundaries in order to defraud someone, regardless of who might get hurt.

If “greedy” refers primarily to the covetous *willingness* to defraud someone of something, then “swindler” refers to the actual action of stealing something. The grammar brings out the close connection between the greedy and the swindler, since they share a direct article and are connected by the word *and*, “because one cannot be rapacious without also being greedy.”⁴⁶ In fact, such a person “does not stop at even violent measures to rob others.”⁴⁷ In these two sins, then, we see violations of the Tenth Commandment against covetousness and of the Eighth Commandment against stealing. Then, Paul mentions “idolaters,” those who violate the First Commandment against having other gods and the Second Commandment about making images (i.e., idols) in worship. This may seem like a big thematic leap between the commandments, but it is interesting that Paul makes the connection between covetousness and idolatry two other places in the New Testament, using the same words (albeit in different forms) in all three places: “...or who is covetous (that is, an idolater)” (Eph. 5:5), and “covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). In these cases, Paul is not talking about the kind of idolatry through graven images that we typically imagine. Instead, *wealth* itself has become the idol, “the object supremely loved and sought. The man, therefore, who sacrifices duty to the acquisition of wealth; who makes gain the great object of his pursuit, is a covetous man. He cannot be a Christian, and should not, according to the apostle, be recognized as such.”⁴⁸ Paul may also be confronting material greed right alongside sexual immorality because he intends to confront those entering into lawsuits against other believers in the next chapter (1 Cor. 6:1–8).⁴⁹

To this initial list of sins, Paul adds two others in v. 11: reviler and drunkard. Brian Rosner helpfully observes that the six sins in this list correspond to the five sins listed in Deuteronomy as requiring capital punishment: the sexually immoral (Deut. 22:21), the idolaters (Deut. 17:3, 7), those who bear malicious false testimony like the “reviler” (Deut. 19:18–19), the rebellious, “drunkard” of a son (Deut. 21:20–21), and the one who steals people—perhaps the most extreme kind of greedy, swindler (Deut. 24:7)—all deserve the death penalty under the law.⁵⁰ Indeed, when Paul writes, “Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor. 5:13), he is quoting these texts in Deuteronomy

⁴⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 89.

⁴⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 186.

⁴⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 227.

⁴⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 89.

⁴⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 245.

⁵⁰ Brian E. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7*, *Arbeiten Zur Geschichte Des Antiken Judentums Und Des Urchristentums* (Book 22) (Leiden, Netherlands, Brill: 1994), 69–70. Cited in Hays, *First Corinthians*, 87–88.

(Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21; 24:7).⁵¹ Thus, Paul is identifying severe sins that deserve a serious response from the church.

Purge the Evil Person (1 Cor. 5:12–13)

Specifically, Paul explains that the church should not even eat with such an unrepentant sinner (1 Cor. 5:11). Eating together here refers to intimate fellowship that would undercut and undermine the church's authority in excommunicating the man from the church.⁵² What would such fellowship communicate to the man about the church's sentence of excommunication and the seriousness of his sin? What would such fellowship communicate to the world about the holiness of Christ? Paul insists that believers must not give the impression that sin is something light, either to the offender or to the watching world.

Thus, Paul reinforces his earlier point about the relationship of the church to the world by insisting that he (and the church) has nothing to do with judging outsiders, since God alone judges them (1 Cor. 5:12–13). As Lenski writes, "We certainly do not need to judge those that are without, for they do not even attempt to come in. God will attend to them, and it is our business to leave them in God's hands."⁵³ Instead, our task is to judge those *inside* the church as we all pursue holiness together. This does not mean that our churches should be legalistic, critical, litigious communities, but rather that we must all earnestly pursue holiness together. Whenever someone refuses to repent from their sin, Paul quotes the Old Testament Scripture: "Purge the evil person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13).

Discussion Questions

1) Why is the purity and sanctity of the church so important? Why should unrepentant sins lead the church to mourn (1 Cor. 5:2)? Why must the church take the drastic step of excommunication rather

⁵¹ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 116. My note: the ESV translates the Hebrew in Deuteronomy as "purge the *evil* from your midst," and the Greek in 1 Corinthians 5:13 as "purge the *evil person* from among you," but the Greek in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament is identical to what Paul writes in Greek, except that Deuteronomy has a future tense ("you shall purge...") while Paul uses an imperative form ("purge...").

⁵² "In the first place, we must ascertain whether he addresses here the whole Church, or merely individuals. I answer, that this is said, indeed, to individuals, but, at the same time, it is connected with their discipline in common; for the power of excommunicating is not allowed to any individual member, but to the entire body. When, therefore, the Church has excommunicated any one, no believer ought to receive him into terms of intimacy with him; otherwise the authority of the Church would be brought into contempt, if each individual were at liberty to admit to his table those who have been excluded from the table of the Lord. By *partaking of food* here, is meant either living together, or familiar association in meals. For if, on going into an inn, I see one who has been excommunicated sitting at table, there is nothing to hinder me from dining with him; for I have not authority to exclude him. What Paul means is, that, in so far as it is in our power, we are to shun the society of those whom the Church has cut off from her communion." (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 194–95. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xii.iii.html>>)

⁵³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 232.

than simply shepherding the sinner toward repentance? What does the church lose without church discipline? What does the sinner lose without it?

2) What is the difference between leaven and yeast? How does leaven permeate and contaminate an entire lump of dough? How does old patterns corrupting sin work its way, deeper and deeper, into a person's heart? How does the corruption of sin affect a church? What corrupting sins are lingering and contaminating your life right now?

3) How does the Passover sacrifice foreshadow Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross? What did God symbolize by requiring his old covenant people to get rid of all the leaven in their homes during the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread? How do those old covenant shadows point to the holiness required of God's new covenant people?

4) What role does the church have today in judging those in the world? What role does the church have today in judging those within the church? Why does God instruct us to purge out corruption from the church rather than passing judgment on the world? What corruption do you need to purge out of your own life?