

Bible Study Series - The Epistle of 1 Corinthians

Moral and Ethical Disorder in the Church

1 Corinthians 5-6

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 1- 4, having addressed the issue of disunity in the church, Paul turned his attention to some specific problems the church was facing. In Chapters 5-6 he addressed some moral and ethical issues, mainly in the areas of sexual immorality and lawsuits among members. This section can be divided into three parts:

1. Sexual immorality within a family (1 Cor. 5)
2. Legal cases among believers (1 Cor. 6:1-11)
3. Sexual immorality with prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:12-20)

Laxity in Church Discipline (Ch. 5)

Paul was outraged in learning that there was a man in the church living in sexual sin with his father's wife (i.e. his stepmother), and the church was treating it lightly. Such an activity was considered incestuous and a taboo among the pagans, yet the Corinthian Christians seemed to have accepted this behaviour (v.2). Paul was expecting that the brother would have been disciplined. How? The unrepentant man should have been put way from the fellowship of the believers (v. 2).

Paul explains that this discipline is for the salvation of the man (v. 5). By putting the man out, he should be aware of the consequences of his actions and remove any false sense of security he may have in remaining among the fellowship of believers. The hope is the man would recognise and become uncomfortable with his sinful action, repent and be added back to the fellowship.

The purpose of church discipline is not for punishment but for correction, it's not for condemnation but for restoration. "Church discipline is not a group of 'pious policemen' out to catch a criminal. Rather, it is a group of broken-hearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore an erring member of the family." (Wiersbe)

Is church discipline taken seriously today? When someone comes under church discipline, is it seen as punishment and disfellowshipping?

Why was Paul calling them to deal with this matter urgently? Just as how a small amount of yeast "*works its way through a whole batch of bread dough pretty fast,*" (v. 7 MGS) he wanted them to get rid of the corruption as quickly as possible before it infected the church.

Lawsuits Before Non-Christians Judges (6:1-11)

There seem to have been a case where one believer was wronged by another and instead of settling it among themselves, it ended up in the local courts. Paul's problem with this arrangement was because the seat of the civil magistrate was located in the heart of the market place, and such lawsuits would be public knowledge satisfying the Greek culture that found legal battles to be entertaining.

Paul wasn't suggesting that these 'ungodly' judges were bad and therefore was using the term from a religious perspective, not a moral one. He felt that the Corinthian Christians should not be seeking justice from those who were not justified before God.

Does this mean that Christians should never use the secular courts? No, Paul is not implying that, because in Romans 13:3-4 he states that we are to submit to such authority especially in dealing with criminal cases, but he thinks where there are civil disputes, Christians could deal with those among themselves.

What are your thoughts on this?

Paul then addressed the man who was wronged. In Ch. 6:7 he said, "*The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?*" This person was being asked to do something hard. He was being asked to give up what he deserved and take a loss for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Please note, I don't believe Paul was suggesting that the man should suffer wrong by not confronting the person, he was saying it's better to suffer loss than to go to unbelievers with this matter. Ideally, the church should settle the dispute.

What are your thoughts on accepting the loss when wronged by someone? Do you think Paul's recommendation is applicable in our contemporary setting?

Paul rebuked the man who did the wrong. (6:8-11) By cheating and doing wrong to his brother, Paul told him that he was dishonest, and reminded him "*that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?* (v. 9). By cheating his brother, the man placed himself in the bad company of others who would not inherit the kingdom of God. It is possible that the man thought that his action was not as grave as others but Paul wanted him to know that all sins result in the same thing, exclusion from the kingdom of God.

It is easy for us to place a weighting on some actions or sins over others and think that our little one-off action is not as bad as others. But whether our sin is an occasional one or one that characterise our lifestyle, we are being reminded from this text that we need to confess them before God because all sins are grave.

We also need to bear in mind that many persons will reject the things of God and the fellowship of the believers because of dishonest behaviour among the saints of Christ.

Sexual Immorality (With Prostitutes) (1 Cor. 6:12-20)

Paul turns his attention to another problem that was plaguing this church; sexual immoral practices with prostitutes. The Corinthian Christians thought they were at liberty to use the services of prostitutes, which was culturally accepted and was a practiced among the religious pagans.

The Corinthian Christians seem to have been using a slogan about permissibility: - “*I have the right to do anything,*” (6:12 NIV), and were using it as a licence to sin. Paul however, countered “*but not everything is beneficial.*” So while we have freedom to do what we want such freedom should not be used as an excuse or licence to sin.

The Corinthians were using the motto “*Food for the stomach and the stomach for food,*” (v.13) to justify giving their bodies whatever their bodies wanted. “My body wants food, so I eat. My body wants sex, so I hire a prostitute. What’s the problem?” ¹

Paul then use the opportunity in giving a theological lesson about the body. He explained to them their bodies are

1. Joined to Christ (v.15) and therefore should not be joined to prostitutes.
2. Temples of the Holy Spirit (v.19), therefore they do not belong to themselves and are not free to do as they like.

Paul wanted them to understand that the temple is the place of worship where the holy presence of God dwells and where worship is expressed. When a believer allows sexual immorality to take over his/her life, he/she runs the risk of this becoming an idol that can draw that person away from God.

In light of this then, they were told to flee sexual immorality (v. 18).

Glossary of Terms

Excommunication – in the NT, a form of church discipline that revoked a person’s privilege as part of the community of believers. Typically imposed for unrepented sin or heresy, to preserve the community’s purity and hopefully to bring the offender to repentance (Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 1 Tim. 1:18-20) ²

¹<https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/1-corinthians-6/>

²<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/knowing-the-bible-1-corinthians/#week-5-sexual-immorality-and-legal-cases-1-cor-51-620>