

2.1 Life-Saving Surgery

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[0 : 00] Okay, well we come now to our Bible reading, so please do grab a Bible and turn to the New Testament to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And later in our service, Josh will be preaching to us, beginning a new series in chapters 5 to 7 of this epistle.

Full of such crucial teaching for the church today. So we're going to read the whole chapter. That's right, isn't it?

Yeah, whole chapter. 1 Corinthians chapter 5, and we begin reading at verse 1. So hear the word of the Lord. 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, and you are arrogant. Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit. And as if at present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.

[1 : 21] 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.

Your boasting is 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.

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, 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 sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters.

Since then, you would need to get out of the world. But now, I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of 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.

[2 : 54] For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside.

Purge the evil person from among you. Well, amen, and may God bless to us this challenging chapter. Well, good evening.

Do open your Bibles again to 1 Corinthians chapter 5. Our passage this evening is all about a disease that, if left to fester, will kill a church.

And so Paul is taking steps to perform life-saving surgery. There is something that must be cut out of this church in order to save it. Paul wants Corinth to have its preoccupation with status, and so indifference to sin removed.

This chapter that we're studying together is best known as being the chapter on church discipline. And so very often it's trotted out when someone has done something particularly bad.

[4 : 09] And sadly, it's very often used as a means of practicing some form of public shaming. And the focus of the application is very often placed on the individual. But Paul's focus here is very much on the church.

Remember, Paul is dealing with a church that at a fundamental level in Corinth is abandoning the apostolic preaching and pattern of the cross. They just don't like all the weakness that's associated with it.

Preferring instead things that elevate them here and now. And so wherever we look in this letter, we see that same problem lurking. Remember the words that mark them out back in chapter 4?

They were kings. They were rich. They were wise. Strong. Held in honor. And what they were doing was really dressing up sheer worldliness with piety.

And they believed their own hype. And so the Corinthian view of people was that some were winners, some were losers. Some were strong, some were weak.

[5 : 17] And on and on it goes. Well, Paul's showing us in chapters 5 to 6 that this problem that flows through the whole of the Corinthian church's life means that they're unable to judge things clearly.

Despite their great claims to wisdom, they lack even the most basic Christian discernment. Proving by their actions that they misunderstand both the cross and the resurrection to come.

And so for us to treat 1 Corinthians 5 as something akin to a manual on church discipline is to rip it out of its setting here in Corinth. 1 Corinthians is a letter known for being full of the glitziest issues, if that isn't too glib a way of putting it.

Netflix would have no shortage of things to pick out from this to make material on, to entertain the world. And chapter 5 is the first real gossip column issue to feature.

Scandalous sex. But the real issue is something far more serious. And so the first thing we see this evening is a truly spiritual church takes sin seriously, verses 1 to 5.

[6 : 30] A truly spiritual church takes sin seriously. The real health of any church is seen in how it ministers to those of their number who are making an utter mess of things.

What's the problem here that has Paul so agitated? I don't think it's that the man is sleeping with his stepmom per se, but rather what his presence in the church reveals about the church.

Pause there for a moment. I'm sure there will be near universal acceptance that incest like this is out of bounds. Wrong, weird, worrying, wicked.

And Deuteronomy 22 is crystal clear in saying that this is wrong. But I don't think that that's what Paul is animated about. The reality is that in any church, any minister, they're likely to face all kinds of pastoral situations involving sex and people making a mess of things.

In that and many other arenas. Of all people, Christians ought to be least surprised at what people are capable of. We knew that sin corrupts us.

[7 : 42] We knew that we do all kinds of things that mess up lives and marriages. Both our own and others. Paul's concern is far, far bigger here than this one man.

Look at verse 1. There is sexual immorality. And it's a man having his father's wife. But look at the other details. What's happened is even scandalous to the pagans.

Yet the Corinthians are tolerating it. And more than anything else, verse 2, they're arrogant. Seems astonishing, doesn't it?

Mighty Corinth, the church that stands above all others, or so they think. And yet here in broad daylight is one of their members living in open scandal. That even the world thinks is beyond appeal.

The disease that could kill this church is that they have allowed one of their own to implode. And they don't care. His obvious sin doesn't seem to be a huge problem for them at all.

[8 : 48] The issues clearly known about. It's not just whispers and secrets. Word has even reached Paul about it. Corinth, in their bravado, in their quest to be spiritual giants, people of significance, they expose of themselves a callousness for real flesh and blood church members.

Look at verse 2. The Corinthians' response is utterly incongruous for a people who know the seriousness of sin and the cost of the cross and the bonds that we share in Christ.

One of their own has made a mess. And they're arrogant. Proud about themselves. Ought you not rather to mourn? Their response is more akin to inviting a weeping widow to a party.

Where's the love in that? Well, Paul, verse 3, steps in with decisive judgment. The right, careful, spiritual kind of judgment.

The kind of judgment that the Corinthians aren't capable of, despite their so-called wisdom. They're busy in chapter 4 judging Paul's ministry of failure. Instead of dealing with what is right in front of their own eyes.

[10 : 09] And so Paul has to get involved with his judgment. And his judgment is full of genuine loving concern. A church that is serious about loving one another will be prepared to do the same thing as Paul.

Sin must be taken seriously. Of course, it's rare and unusual to enjoy or to relish discipline when a child steps well over the line of the boundaries that a loving parent sets for him.

It isn't an enjoyable thing to undergo that discipline, is it? I doubt the parent enjoys it, never mind the child. But that's the very thing that down the line, and even long into adulthood, bears fruit so

that the child grows into a mature, rounded individual, equipped for life.

Well, here's the discipline that happens in the church. Verse 2. This man is to be removed. But perhaps more fully, verse 5.

Paul says that they're to deliver this man to Satan. What does he mean by that? How can that be loving? Well, firstly, notice what Paul is not saying here.

[11 : 21] This isn't Paul saying, damn this man to hell. He's gone beyond the peel. It's irretrievable. No, verse 5. The discipline is so that his soul may be saved.

It's a loving thing to practice discipline. The discipline is for the destruction of the flesh. That's what Paul says. The flesh, the part of this man that loves the world.

What Paul is saying to do is to send this man out into Satan's realm. And Satan's kingdom isn't hell. Satan is the prince of the power of the air.

He reigns in this world. It is here that he has power. Power to tempt and woo us by the things that our flesh loves. And there comes a time when the only thing left for a pastor and a church to do, when someone refuses to repent, when someone willfully carries on in disobedience to the Lord and his words, is to let that person see the full consequences of what they're doing.

For while sexual sin can ruin marriages and all kinds of other things, unrepentant sin ruins souls. It's better to be out for a time than out for eternity.

[12 : 38] Friends, it is never an easy thing for a church or a pastor to confront someone about sin. It is always easier to just let it go. And when we do this, it's never done well if it's done with relish.

This passage shouldn't ever set us off hunting out other people's problems. It ought to steal our spines that when we have to have a dreaded conversation, we know that it's necessary and it's for someone's good.

And it's a passage that should remind us that when someone does go to the effort of having a hard conversation with us, that they love us enough to do it. It's always easier to just let it go.

Grasping nettles stings. And perhaps now, maybe even more than in Paul's day, it's easy to question the point when a church confronts us with a truth we don't like.

There are plenty of other churches down the road they can head off to. It's our loss. It's easy to think. Why on earth would our leaders, why would you as a brother or sister take the risk of confronting someone?

[13 : 45] It could ruin a relationship. It could cause someone to leave the church. Perhaps taking a sizable tithe with them. Why bother? Just let them instead continue to hear the preaching and pray that they'll come to their senses.

Well, that's not Paul's solution. And here's why. Week by week, when we gather as a church, our worship together ministers to our souls, assuring us that we have received grace.

Our prayers together ask the Lord to grant grace to us, to assure us of pardon. God's word proclaims the excellencies of Christ, the one through whom we've received grace upon grace.

Our sharing together in communion seals to us, preaches to us, assures our very souls that God truly forgives those who belong to him. Baptism demonstrates to us visually that as real as the water is that pours over someone's head, so real is the cleansing from sin that Christ's blood brings. All of the marks of the church, all of the means of grace that we've been given, bring real comfort to the penitent believer. To those who mourn for sin, our worship confirms to us that we will be comforted.

[15 : 02] And so isn't it a cruel thing to allow these things to continue to murmur to someone that everything's going to be all right when the truth is something different?

Of course now, removing someone from church, spelling out that they're no longer a member is not the first thing we do to love people who are heading for ruin. In many ways, it's the last. There ought to be many tears, many prayers, many conversations before this.

In fact, it's probably a failure if it gets to this. But a commitment to one another that truly cherishes each other's souls means being prepared even to cut out and cut off someone, even if it feels like cutting off a piece of ourselves.

Because sadly, there does come a point where when someone will not listen, will not change, where their lives willfully betray that they're shunning the Lord and his word and his people.

There comes a point where the only loving thing to do is to make clear that they're choosing disaster. There's no use pretending. That helps nobody. Paul is saying, make clear what is already true.

[16:18] He says later in verse 7, be who you really are. When someone is in every discernible way not living as the people of God, when someone is a member of a church in name only, then the loving thing to do is make clear the reality for their benefit, for the saving of their soul.

Deliver them over to Satan, into his kingdom, out there in the world. Make clear that that's where they're at home, not the church. false comfort here is a cruelty.

Confront them with a harsh reality that what is soon now is what is reaped in eternity. Because the stakes are that high. Sometimes it's only when people see a reality for themselves that they appreciate it for what it is.

Maybe, just maybe, being confronted with life outside, maybe then they might return and see the wonders of the Lord Jesus. Well, the fact that Corinth hadn't done this shows that they were content for one of their own to drift off to hell.

A truly spiritual church loves one another enough to stand shoulder to shoulder together to fight sin, however costly it becomes.

[17:39] And a truly spiritual church does this because they knew the costliness of sin, verses 6 to 8. A truly spiritual church knows the costliness of sin.

The truth is that the cross lays bare for us just how serious sin is. A true church delights that they've been washed clean by the cross, that sin no longer need master them.

The man isn't just removed for his own benefit, he's to be removed for the benefit of the church. Sin is this world's greatest problem and the cross deals with it.

So don't invite sin back into your home. Verse 6, the Corinthians' boasting is not good.

Their boasting is irreconcilable for a church that truly understands the cross. Look at the imagery that's used here by Paul. He talks about leaven, yeast. One of our former apprentices was in this week and was saying that they'd started to make their own bread again, probably much like everyone else.

[18:48] We'd toyed with baking bread during lockdown and this former apprentice and I had shared a sardew starter. It's amazing that all it takes with bread is one little bit of starter or a little bit of yeast and it spreads throughout the whole loaf causing it to rise.

Nice, airy, delicious, fresh bread. Well, Paul is of course calling to mind here the Israelites as they're awaiting rescue from Egypt. They were to eat only unleavened bread for seven days with belts, buckles, sandals on, ready to go, eating in haste as they waited.

And then once they were miraculously rescued and freed from slavery in Egypt, they were to celebrate that every year. A celebration that they were now a rescued people.

So Jewish households for seven days would cleanse any leaven out of their houses often using special sealed closets to separate the leaven out. They'd use new utensils, dishes, to make sure that there wasn't a hint of leaven in what they were eating because if even the tiniest little bit remained then that would spread throughout the whole bread.

Well now, Paul has a bit of knowledge to share with the Corinthians. It's a painful thing for him to say, the wise, knowledgeable church. He says, do you not know?

[20:11] Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Do you not understand just how serious sin is? Do you not know that Jesus went to excruciating lengths to rid us of this problem?

The truth is that my sin is a big problem for all of you. Whether you know about it or not, and the same is true for yours, we have a completely impoverished view of both the church and the cross if we think that we're thriving, mature, godly Christians when a dear brother or sister in our church family is struggling terribly with sin.

sin is no little thing. If ignored or overlooked, it will spread throughout the whole bread, the whole church. Notice the language that Paul uses throughout this chapter.

Three times in verses three to five, he talks about his spirit or the man's spirit. And turn back over to 1 Corinthians chapter three, verse 16.

Paul says, Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?

[21:27] If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. Do you see how Paul is picking up this idea again?

The church is the place where God's spirit dwells. Our bodies are the temples in which God's spirit dwells. And so both have been given an esteemed purpose to be holy.

For Corinth, their concern was for honor instead of holiness. And that was a rotten infection that would spread throughout the whole church. Verse seven, Paul says, Cleanse it out that you might be a new lump as you really are.

That's what the cross has achieved. Christ, the true Passover lamb has been sacrificed. We are rescued not just from Egypt but from sin and all of its devastating effects.

Christ's blood has washed clean every sin. All filth is gone. We are made new, given a new purpose, no longer indelibly stained by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[22 : 39] So why would you go back to that? I've never had bed bugs but I'm told that they're an absolute nightmare to get rid of. When infested, most things that you own that have them are best thrown out.

There's no point in trying to retrieve them. And there are great measures that have to be gone to kill the bed bugs. Tents erected inside your house and all sorts of things like that.

And you've got to think, having gone through all of that, knowing the ordeal, knowing what they do, would you ever risk bringing something back in that would bring them back? Why would you choose that?

Well, Paul is saying, Christ has made us unleavened. Why would we go looking for yeast? To do so is to diminish the cross. The cross means we don't have to jostle for position.

We don't need to fight our way to the top. We're cured. So don't go sipping the old poison. The cross tells us that sin is the world's greatest problem.

[23 : 44] Not lack of education, not lack of money, not lack of power in all its forms. Sin's the greatest problem. And redemption is the world's greatest treasure.

Losing sight of that produces a church that is unmoved when sin runs riot. But because Christ is our Passover lamb, we have been given everything we need for the fight.

Paul says, verse 8, let us therefore celebrate the festival. Let us celebrate that Christ has washed us clean. Let's enjoy it. Let's take hold of it. Let's be who we really are.

We're unleavened bread. He's removed every imperfection, every taint. Take hold of it. It's yours.

Let go of the pretenses and the pride. Enjoy sincerity and truth.

Let the malice and evil go and the worldliness with it. Sin no longer has to define us. It doesn't have to shape our world and our desires. Instead, celebrate what Christ has done.

[24 : 46] The very thing that makes you into a church. Embrace all that is wonderful about stepping out of Satan's realm, the world, and stepping into Christ.

Christ. Well, finally, Paul tells us that a truly spiritual church cherishes the right kind of relationships. A truly spiritual church cherishes the right kind of relationships, verses 9 to 13. Who we associate with tells a very potent story.

So take care. The Corinthians have been told to be careful with their associations and they've made the case that's impossible. Verse 10, we'd have to associate with nobody.

We'd have to be taken out of this world. Well, I think that's a rather clever person trying to find a convenient way of twisting Paul's words to carry on as they wanted. But nonetheless, Paul clarifies, verse 11.

[25 : 46] He says, be careful in associating with those who call themselves Christians if they persist in various sins. Now, the Corinthians are very careful about their associations, but they're careful in the wrong way.

Do you remember the I follow Apollos posse or the I'm with Cephas crew? The Corinthians want to associate with the powerful and the impressive in this age.

That's where they think they belong. And when that's the case, isn't it so easy to overlook things? If what counts about someone is their status, their success, then so long as they're wealthy and well-spoken and talk a good game, then we can cut them some slack.

Greed, being a little loose with alcohol, that's not such a big deal. They're an impressive person.

Now, of course, it wouldn't be spoken of quite so crudely, but when there's a tough conversation to be had, don't we pause for a few moments longer to think things through when it's someone who in a worldly sense offers more?

I'll be cast out of their circles. I really like their circles. I won't get to enjoy hospitality at their house anymore. They do the best Sunday lunch. Or perhaps as a team leader, you think, this is the most gifted person on my team, I don't want to lose them.

[27 : 08] Or all the more if it's the leader of a church. Well, this minister has made us a church that's known. His books bring people to our church. We wouldn't be what we are without him.

Oh, it's only a minor flaw in his character. Who hasn't lashed out? It's not like he's committed some sexual sin. I wonder if that's the kind of thinking that allowed corns to get into this state.

This man was carrying on unchallenged, perhaps because he was worth associating with. And so when flaws reared their heads from time to time, they were just brushed under the carpet. And each time was a little bit more obvious until it isn't too far a jump to be unbothered by the blatant sexual sin.

Now, Paul doesn't say disassociate with anyone who isn't a Christian. Far from it. In fact, the reason he clarifies this in verses 9 to 11 is that throughout this letter, Paul has a standing concern that the church are engaging with the world to win the world.

We've seen that clearly before in chapters 8 to 10. They're to take care on how they eat in other people's homes for the sake of their witness. And Paul expects unbelievers to be present on Sundays, chapter 14, tells us that.

[28 : 23] And Paul knew that nothing undermines the gospel more than a church riddled with hypocrisy. Remember, the pagans were watching. They could see the scandal, the incest that was being tolerated.

And so Paul's particular focus in these verses is helping the church to see that we ought to be very concerned with one another's godly characters, not glamorous credentials.

I wonder if the Corinthians depend their relationships on whether someone is strong or weak. Regardless of the evidence of faith at work within someone, all they care about is whether this person will elevate me socially or whether they're beneath me.

If this man was poor and weak, would his sin of incest have been overlooked? I wonder, our relationships, how we cherish people who call themselves brothers reveals what we really think about sin.

Do we prize a relationship for what it gives us or because we care about where our brother or sister is heading? Now, present throughout all this chapter is the large shadow of Deuteronomy.

[29 : 41] Deuteronomy. The very last words of chapter five purge the evil person from your midst or a direct quote from the law from Deuteronomy chapter 22 and it comes in the exact same section that makes it very clear that this incest that's going on in Corinth is absolutely wrong.

But the shadow of Deuteronomy is even bigger than that. Look at the list of things that Paul uses in verse 10 and 11. This isn't just a random list of sins.

sexual immorality, the greedy swindlers, the idolaters, revilers, drunkards. That's not a random list. There are two reasons they're here. First, they are the evils that Deuteronomy says to purge from the midst of the people of God. Throughout the whole law, these are the things that God says must be removed from the people of God.

If you read through Deuteronomy, you'll see that any time purge this evil from your midst is used, it's about one of these things. The second reason, every single one of them is present here in Corinth.

[30 : 53] In our chapter, others, in our chapter and others, there's sexual immorality. Next week, chapter 6, we see greedy swindling at play. Chapter 10, there are idolaters. Chapter 11, they celebrate communion drunk, and throughout the whole letter, they revile Paul.

Now, for those who think that the law is no longer important for new covenant believers, I'm afraid Paul is not with you on that. This whole chapter rests on the law and how important it is for the church.

God's law was given primarily as the way of life for the redeemed. It sets the agenda, the tone, the feel, the look of what the church should be like. It pictures what God's kingdom looks like.

So how do we celebrate the Passover? What does it look like to be who we are today? Well, the law shows us. It's the picture of life in God's kingdom, life for washed, redeemed humanity.

And that figures, doesn't it? That Paul says our concern is for those within the church. Paul doesn't want Christ's church corns to become a synagogue of Satan.

[32 : 01] There are some things that cannot get a free pass in God's church. That's not to say that the church cannot have sinners in it. Otherwise, we'd obviously be empty, wouldn't we? But it's to say that where the plain teaching of scripture and the Christian life is overtly ignored by a church member, without any real repentance, without any intervention, then that erodes the power of the

cross for that church.

It says sin isn't that big a problem. So Jesus isn't that great a Lord. It isn't our place to demand and expect the world to keep the law of God.

Of course they won't. They've got darkened hearts. But God will see to that. They aren't excused. But Paul's concern is for the church.

We most certainly ought to help one another to enjoy the fullness of God's law inside the church.

That's the basis, the concern that ought to shape our relationships in church.

We don't tend to like the language of judging one another. I remember a dear friend some years ago was set in an unwise path, and I tried to express concern, no doubt very fumblingly so.

[33 : 18] The retort came, don't be so judgmental. It's a very costly thing to take sin seriously. Sin is a struggle. But what Paul is saying here is it mustn't be a lonely struggle, and it must not be a selective struggle.

The church has been washed clean, that's who we are, and the loving thing for us to do is to help one another. Silence in an action isn't loving. Look at the strength of Paul's command, verse 11.

Do not associate with those who are obstinately heading for disaster. Don't play let's pretend. Don't even eat with them. Some people seem to take this as don't have communion with them, but I think it's broader than that.

Hospitality, having people to eat at your table was a significant thing in the first century. It was a seal of approving of the relationship, approving of the person, investing in them. And Paul is saying if someone who has called themselves a Christian refuses to listen to God's word, refuses to listen to brothers and sisters, and keeps charting a disastrous course, then you cannot allow them to think that everything can continue normally, even if they're an MSP or a professor or a millionaire.

In fact, particularly if they're these things, the key identity that determines whether we must act or not over sin is verse 11.

[34 : 51] It's those who bear the name brother. Don't let status get in the way. The world is watching and hypocrisy stinks. There's no free pass for the powerful.

Now, doing all of this can be very painful indeed. It's not an easy thing to have conversation with someone over sin, over struggle. But the soul of the individual, the soul of the church, and the souls of people out there in the world beckon us to do so.

So what do you do if, in all likelihood, this will happen in the coming years? What do you do if a good Christian friend tells you that they're in a relationship that the Bible forbids? Paul's saying we must not normalize it.

We mustn't give it a seal of approval. No likes on Facebook. No inviting the couple to dinner as if everything's fine. A church that is unprepared to love each other properly by verse 8, celebrating with sincerity and truth.

A church that isn't prepared to get involved in the messiness of sin, who look the other way. A church that is a church whose pulse will soon flatline.

[36 : 11] It's not a mighty church. It's a dying or dead one. Paul tells us, be what you are. Christ, our Passover lamb, has washed you clean.

So enjoy the cleanliness. Let's pray. Lord, we shudder at our own sin.

We marvel that you would display such grace to us. And so we ask for your help. May we not get complacent.

May we not show partiality. May we not be presumptuous. But instead, help us to be a church who truly love one another in costly ways.

So that we'll do all that we can to stand side by side, mature in eternity. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

[37 : 18] Amen.