

Pastor Jim Lloyd

Date: August 13, 2023

Title: HOW SHOULD WE DEAL WITH SIN IN THE CHURCH?

Text: 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Pastor began by showing a few pictures from our trip to Columbus, Ohio for General Council and Kentucky to see the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter.

Now to the sermon... (Here Pastor showed a video.) I'm going to begin by showing a clip from the old *Andy Griffith* show. In watching this, I ask you to determine the moral of the story or the takeaway. What is the lesson taught by Barney Fife? I plan to make reference to this later in the sermon.

Today we're continuing our series on 1st Corinthians. Today we land on chapter 5. Verses 1 & 2 read: *¹"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. ²And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you."*

If you are a first-time guest, I might as well tell you that today's message is of an unusual kind. I don't know if I've ever preached from 1 Corinthians 5 before. I like to think I keep rather good notes. I did a digital search of 1 Corinthians 5 from my sermon archive and got nothing. So, I suppose we could discern that I've not been particularly anxious to share from this scripture portion. As you've already heard from the reading of the first verses, this chapter contains some ADULT THEMES. I don't plan on being explicit – the adult theme is mostly in the background because the focus of this passage is NOT so much on what the guy was doing but rather HOW THE CHURCH WAS RESPONDING to what the guy was doing. I tell you that – especially you parents – so that if you feel like this might raise some questions you are not ready to answer, this might be a good time to acquaint yourself with our excellent kids' ministries. They are meeting downstairs. Miss Debbie and her helpers do a grand job.

It is often the case, when I preach through a book of the Bible, that at some point I come to a section or two where I ask myself: Why in the world did I decide to do this series? I'd like to think that the reason I preach any series is because that's where I believe the Holy Spirit is leading me. Today's text is challenging, not only because it addresses a situation that isn't so pleasant to preach about, BUT... It also presents the challenge of: How do we apply this text to OUR church, OUR ministry, and OUR lives – when it is addressing something that might not seem to apply to us?

In looking at the whole of 1 Corinthians, there are 5 major sections in this letter of Paul's. The first section, chapters 1-4, spoke of the problems concerning divisions in the church. Chapter 5 addresses some confusion the church seems to have regarding sex. Corinth was a notoriously IMMORAL city. It was situated on an isthmus between two major ports, one on either side, which turned the city into both an economic powerhouse and popular vacation destination. Young and upwardly mobile people from all over the Empire poured into Corinth. These young, upwardly mobile people brought young, upwardly mobile issues. So, sexual immorality WAS a problem. That is not to say that the sexual immorality of Corinth was only an issue with young people. It went beyond that. The city boasted many temples to the Greek and Roman gods, and the worship rituals in these temples sometimes included prostitution. The point is that sexual immorality was all around them. Considering that, I suppose that it's not too surprising that they were dealing with it in the church. Know that the church was never intended to be a club for saints. It is very much a hospital for sinners. Just so you know – I, too, have been a patient at that hospital. However, this sexual immorality that they were dealing with or SHOULD have been dealing with, Paul said, goes beyond even PAGAN immorality. Pagans would have called it nasty.

Again, verse 1 – it's the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles – a man is sleeping with his father's wife. "His father's wife" means either his mother or his stepmother. Most scholars say it's his stepmother since Paul calls her "his father's wife" and not "his mother." There are really no details

beyond that. I don't know and honestly, I don't care. Though we could come up with a lot of questions. Was the father STILL LIVING? Were they STILL MARRIED? What were THE AGES of THOSE INVOLVED? Were they all living in the SAME HOUSEHOLD? Was everyone ON BOARD WITH THIS ARRANGEMENT? And so on. We don't know ANY of those details, but what we DO KNOW is enough to know that this was wrong by every imaginable standard – even in the anything-goes culture of first century Corinth, this situation was considered beyond the realm of propriety.

Here's the sad part – THE CHURCH appeared to be okay with it. Paul says in verse 2... *And you are arrogant (proud)! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?*" The assumption is that this man was more than just an occasional visitor, or a casual attendee and their living arrangement was less than discreet. Everyone seemed to know this guy, and everyone seemed to know what was going on. Perhaps he was a leader. Maybe he was a wealthy and influential member, BUT... Paul clearly was not okay with the church's response to the situation. Why weren't they dealing with it? Some may have thought, "Hey, this is Corinth, to each his own." There were likely those who said, "What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth. Who are we to judge?" Some probably thought, "Hey Christ has freed us from the law, so that means he's freed to love in whatever way seems best to him." It seems to me that the way Paul is speaking to them assumes that most people in the church KNEW it was wrong – certainly Paul knew it was wrong. One reason they weren't dealing with it was because it would have created a scandal; it would have given the church a black eye and they were arrogant and didn't want to go through that. You know, these kinds of situations ALWAYS get messy. Usually, when you confront people like this, they don't say, "is what I was doing NOT okay?" No, this guy would have been offended and made a scene. He may have been a prominent figure. Perhaps he gave lots of money to the church. So, let's NOT poke the hornet's nest. Let's leave well enough alone. But what does Paul say? A brother of yours is being destroyed by sin, AND... You are more concerned about your reputation or not rocking the boat. Verse 2 – *"...ought you not rather to mourn?"* The word for "mourn" means like "mourning at a funeral" – weeping for him like he had died. Sin is destroying people at your church. Paul said, "MOURN!"

So, Paul says, verse 3, *"Let him who has done this be removed from you..."* Wait a minute – like kick someone out? Like, out of the church? YES! You say, what about unconditional love and acceptance? It's true, we are called to unconditional love, BUT... Our fellowship is conditional. You say, I thought we were to be an open and embracing community. We are, but our primary calling is to be representatives of the family of Jesus. YES, Jesus welcomed into his family people with all kinds of problems – from all kinds of tragic and broken backgrounds. Paul himself was a murderer. Mary Magdalene, one of the female leaders of the early church, had been a prostitute with 7 demons, BUT... Each of them had one thing in common – THEY HAD COME TO A POINT OF REPENTANCE. They had recognized that Jesus is Lord and His way is right. Jesus can take you with all kinds of problems, but you must be willing to go with Him.

We know what Paul was saying to the church in Corinth in this passage. But... The question is: What is God saying to US through this text? As we examine this rather awkward and out-of-control situation there in Corinth, is there anything WE can learn about how to deal with difficult situations in the church today? The good news is: YES, there are lessons to be learned and principles to be applied in the message of 1 Corinthians 5. As we look at this text today, we will consider these lessons.

Paul doesn't waste any time getting to the point. In chapter one he refers to the reports that he had heard from Chloe's household about the various divisions that the church was experiencing AND... NOW he moves to the next item on the list. *"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."* When it comes to an anything-goes culture, I suppose that many an American church could give Corinth a run for their money.

Our church is 95 years old and don't think it has always been squeaky clean. Any church with age and people will have its spots and wrinkles. There are a few pages I'd like to tear from our history. Fortunately, God is better able to do that than we are. In our American culture, every time it looks like we have reached the

bottom of the cesspool, we somehow manage to dig a little deeper. Today we are debating the propriety of behaviors that were unimaginable not so many years ago. Now we have churches that embrace the sins of yesterday. Priests and pastors perform same sex marriages, ignoring Holy Scripture. Denominations even profess to ordain such sinners. It's hard to imagine a church endorsing a lifestyle that is considered too "out there" for our culture, because I'm not sure that our secular culture considers anything too "out there" anymore. Paul was adamant in his take on this matter: This is NOT right. It cannot be ignored. It must be dealt with swiftly and surely, AND... He didn't mince any words. ³*"For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this.* ⁴*So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,* ⁵*hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord."* Okay, Paul, tell us what you REALLY think!

Paul is talking here about the process of church discipline and restoration that Jesus introduced in Matthew 18. A summary of this teaching is that when someone you personally know is caught up in a sin that is destroying their life and/or the lives of those around them, **YOU meet with them PRIVATELY**, one-on-one, talk to them about it and encourage them to repent. If they don't listen to you, you try again, **this time with 2 or 3 SPIRITUALLY MATURE BELIEVERS** who have the credibility to address this situation with you. TOGETHER, you encourage this individual to turn from their destructive behavior. If the individual STILL won't repent, then you **bring it before the larger assembly of leaders**. The purpose is NOT to humiliate this individual. The purpose is to HELP THEM FIND RESTORATION. AND... If they still refuse to listen, then Jesus said we must **treat them as a pagan or a tax-collector**.

Here's the BIG question – How ARE we to treat pagans and tax collectors? We LOVE them. We PRAY for them. We DON'T GIVE UP on them. BUT... We give them NO VOICE of influence in our lives. We typically don't shun them or even bar them from the premises. We don't allow them to lead or allow them to serve. Personally, I can't remember this process ever going beyond the second step in any church I've attended or served. That is probably because, at this point, the individual will either have already repented or have already left the church. I suppose that there are churches who love this process and seem ready to engage in it at the drop of a hat, because they love calling people out. That's not ME! I don't think that is US. We're not like that. I believe that should we ever have to enter this process, that we MUST do it carefully, prayerfully, reluctantly, and with the SOLE objective of bringing restoration and healing into people's lives.

Throughout these verses Paul uses some symbolic language. He talks about yeast and leaven, which I plan to get to in a minute. And... He talks about handing this man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. This is, of course, a metaphor. He's not talking about an actual ritual where we invite the devil to come in and take over from here. He is talking about the time when we must step back and separate ourselves from someone – to STOP INTERVENING and ENABLING – and let them experience the natural and inevitable consequences of their sinful behavior. There is a sense in which – and I want you to follow what I'm saying – certainly there are Biblical records and even present-day situations where it seems rather clear that God punishes sin, BUT... I would argue that there is also the idea that God doesn't need to punish sin because SIN BRINGS ABOUT ITS OWN PUNISHMENT. Galatians 6:7 – *"Man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please the flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction."* The inevitable and unavoidable outcome of sin is NEVER good. It's ALWAYS bad. No one has EVER said to me (in my 68 years), "The pieces of my life all fell into place as soon as I started doing these wrong things OR as soon as I started cheating and lying and drinking to kill the pain and lashing out at those who love me and think only of myself in every situation – at that point things began working out for me and they have ever since." No NEVER, NEVER, NEVER did I EVER hear that because... **"Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay."** Again – "Sin will ALWAYS take you farther than you want to go, ALWAYS keep you longer than you want to stay, and ALWAYS cost you more than you want to pay." One of the persons attributed to that quote was a great apologist, AND... I'm afraid he may have died a great sinner. Sin didn't do him any good; it only did him

bad. Sometimes we find ourselves at a point where we must create distance between ourselves and that person who insists on wreaking havoc in their lives and in the lives of those around them. We have to say, "Since you're not willing to make an effort, since you're not willing to listen to anyone else, I have no choice but to let you go on your own way ... come what may." It's a tough decision and a tough thing to say. And... When we make that decision, it feels like the end of the line, but it isn't necessarily. There is STILL hope.

The truth is, as a church, I don't even want to imagine us being in a situation where we have to take these drastic steps, BUT... I do know that, as individuals, there may be times when we do have to take such steps with family members or friends or co-workers and so on – situations where you have to create distance between yourself and this other person until things get better in one way or another.

So, in the time we have remaining, I want to call your attention to three take-aways from this text – three things to keep in mind when we find ourselves in a situation where we're having to deal with someone else's self-destructive behavior. Here are three take-aways, and they are each encouraging. The first I already alluded to.

1. EVEN IN THE MIDST OF A HOPELESS SITUATION, THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE. Paul said... *"...hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord."* We might be inclined to say, "Hand this person over to Satan so that he can burn for all eternity OR Hand this person over to Satan because God is finished with him and wants nothing further to do with him." Instead, Paul seems to be saying, "There's still hope for this man. His life may have to become a shambles first, and everything might be destroyed, BUT... He can still be restored into a right relationship with God." I've known parents who have had to create separation with their grown children. I read of a young man who had bailed his father out of jail (sometimes literally posting bail) more times than he could remember. He finally reached a point where he had to say, "Dad, I can't be your enabler anymore. I'm saying good-bye." When you say that, it feels so final. And... Sometimes it is. BUT... SOMETIMES it's NOT. I'm told that if you ever attend a *Celebrate Recovery* meeting or an AA meeting, you will hear some heart-breaking stories ... BUT you will also hear stories of redemption. To quote Yogi Berra, "It ain't over till it's over." There's still hope even for the worst of situations and the worst of offenders. Here's the second take-away, and this is why creating distance is sometimes necessary.

2. WE NEED TO BE MINDFUL OF SIN'S CORRUPTING INFLUENCE. Paul uses another metaphor here. ⁶*"Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?"* This is a common reference in Jewish literature. Leaven symbolizes an EVIL influence. It refers to the substance – typically yeast – that is used to produce fermentation in dough and would cause the bread to rise in preparation for baking. It took only a SMALL AMOUNT of yeast – leaven – to make the whole lump of dough rise. That principle is taught throughout Scripture. Even the SMALLEST AMOUNT OF SIN can wreak havoc in people's lives, when it goes unchecked and is given the chance to work its way through the whole lump of our lives. We've seen this at work in our culture. An idea or behavior becomes TOLERABLE, and then it becomes PERMISSABLE, and then it becomes ACCEPTABLE, and then it becomes the NEW STANDARD, and eventually CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION. Let's think back to the *Andy Griffith* video clip that we began with. Barney Fife wanted to strictly enforce the 35 MPH speed limit. I think in the earlier part of that episode, Andy said something along the lines of, "We can give the truckers up to 40 MPH because there's a steep hill up the road." BUT... What did Barney say? "You give them 40 today, they'll do 45 tomorrow. You give them 45 tomorrow, they'll do 50 the next day..." And so on. I'm a little surprised to say this, but in Officer Fife's defense, HE HAS A POINT! Especially when it comes to society. That's the problem with moral compromise. It doesn't just MOVE the boundary. It ultimately REMOVES the boundary. (As Barney said in another episode about letting people jaywalk – "Soon Mayberry will become a regular sin-town.") It doesn't just have an impact on you. It has an impact on others. It has an impact on all of us. When we decide that certain sins are acceptable – or even worse, admirable – we set ourselves up to do the same thing. That is why King Solomon said... *"Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared"*

(Proverbs 22:24-25). Most of us probably have acquaintances, family members, even friends who are prone to fly off the handle for no good reason. Sometimes you can't avoid being in their company, BUT... Here's what you can do: You can decide that you will not let this person's bad behavior influence your behavior. If that means I must avoid them sometimes, AVOID THEM. Here's what I'm saying. Of course, we must take our own sin seriously, and we must hold ourselves to the highest of standards. We ALSO need to take seriously the leaven-like effect of others' behavior and be careful NOT to let their bad behavior influence our behavior. Here's the third take-away.

3. IT'S NOT OUR JOB TO JUDGE THE WORLD, BUT WE DO HAVE A MANDATE TO HOLD ONE ANOTHER ACCOUNTABLE. The church, unfortunately, sometimes has a reputation for judging those beyond our walls, telling others that they are going to Hell. I don't know if that's our job. Here is what Paul says. *"What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?"* So, if it wasn't HIS job – we're talking about Paul, the Apostle, the one who wrote about half the books in the New Testament – if it's not his job to judge those outside the church, then I'm thinking it certainly isn't MY JOB, AND... It's probably not YOUR JOB either. The church has made the mistake far too long of spending time and effort in passing judgment on the world and turning a blind eye to sin within our own circles. Peter said (1 Peter 4:7) – *"For the time has come that judgment must begin at the house of God..."* That's where judgment must begin: WITHIN THE HOUSE OF GOD. That means that we hold one another accountable. When we see someone close to us engaging in behavior that hurts themselves and/or hurts those around them, with great care AND compassion we lovingly intervene and offer to help them find redemption and restoration. It's NOT OUR JOB TO JUDGE, because none of us can pretend we're perfect. We are ALL sinners in need of a Savior. Wherein it's not our job to judge, it IS our responsibility to hold one another accountable, and even, when necessary, confront them. It's not a pleasant task, but it's necessary: for the good of ONE ANOTHER, for the good of the RELATIONSHIP, and for the good of THE CHURCH.

CONCLUSION. So, DOES THIS EVER WORK – this process of Matthew 18, this practice of creating distance from those who refuse to repent? Sometimes it does. In fact, let's jump ahead to Paul's next letter to Corinth. 2 Corinthians chapter 2. Here Paul is referring to this letter we've been studying (1 Corinthians). I'm going to read from the New Living Translation. Paul says... ³*"That is why I wrote to you as I did, so that when I do come, I won't be grieved by the very ones who ought to give me the greatest joy. Surely you all know that my joy comes from your being joyful. ⁴I wrote that letter in great anguish, with a troubled heart and many tears. I didn't want to grieve you, but I wanted to let you know how much love I have for you. ⁵I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt all of you more than he hurt me. ⁶Most of you opposed him, and that was punishment enough. ⁷Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may be overcome by discouragement. ⁸So I urge you now to reaffirm your love for him"* (2 Corinthians 2:3-8). Could Paul be talking about the same man we're talking about today? Many a scholar would say, "Yes." Wouldn't it be great to know that the church in Corinth properly intervened and this man was able to remove himself from an unspeakably sinful lifestyle and was then fully restored to a right relationship with God and his church family? Wouldn't that be good? Whether the man in 2 Corinthians chapter 2 was the same man as in 1 Corinthians 5, I don't know. But... I do know, from the passage I just read, that RESTORATION DOES HAPPEN! When it does, it's our job to CLOSE THE DOOR OF THE PAST, to OFFER FORGIVENESS, to REAFFIRM OUR LOVE, and to HELP THE INDIVIDUAL MOVE ON WITH THEIR LIVES. Creating distance between yourself and someone you love is never pleasant, and it's never easy, but sometimes it's necessary, for the good of all involved. Sometimes separating yourself from someone's behavior is the best thing for THEM. And... Sometimes it's the best thing FOR YOU and FOR ALL OF US. The goal is NOT to establish ourselves as better than everyone else, or to justify our condemnation of anyone else. The GOAL is that we might – as individuals and as a church – BECOME MORE HOLY, MORE PURE, and MORE LIKE CHRIST in every way.