

Dealing with sin in the church

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[0 : 00] Thank you. Do keep the Bible open in front of you. We're going to spend our time in 1 Corinthians 5 this morning. Let me pray for us as we begin. Father, we come humbly before your word now asking for your help in understanding it and applying it. Lord, we want to be a church that radiates your truth and your love. So please help us as we study your word now.

And Lord, as we look at this passage here, we pray for our young people next door studying your word together. We pray that you would speak to them and lead them in your ways. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, if you have been coming along to church here for a while, you'll know that our general practice is to preach through whole books of the Bible chapter by chapter.

Now, the advantage is that we don't miss anything out. That's good because, as we're told, all scripture is God-breathed and useful for training, rebuking, correcting and equipping the saints in works of service.

We need it all. The problem with that, of course, is that we don't miss anything out. And that means that sometimes we come to passages like this and the one next week.

[1 : 16] We're faced with difficult chapters. So if you were here last week and breathe the sigh of relief that we had skipped over these words, well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. The reason was simply, and I don't know whether this will work out, but we wanted to have three weeks where the issue of sexual immorality in the church was front and centre.

And that was an issue that the Corinthian church was wrestling with, as it is today, an issue for the wider church of England as well. But if anything, the Corinthian church was even more mixed up. But if you know anything about ancient Corinth, perhaps you'll understand the reason why. The city was dominated by a mountain or a hill in the middle, sat on top of which was the temple to the Greek god Aphrodite.

Not that true love was her kind of thing. One ancient source said that in its heyday, there were about a thousand prostitutes housed in that temple. And sadly, that culture of free sex permeated the city.

And sadly, it has made its way into the church as well. Now, church history will tell you that this kind of scandal has been a recurring problem.

[2 : 25] And if you've read the recent reports of the kind of drinking and promiscuous culture in Bangor Cathedral, you'll have a very and desperately sad modern example.

The challenge for us and for every community of believers is to learn from their mistakes and not to repeat them. See, our call, the call on the church in every age is to be in the world, but not of it. To be a faithful people who live holy lives, different from the standards of the world, while at the same time reaching out to a broken world with the beautiful grace and divine love of God.

That is not an easy thing to do. It wasn't easy then. It isn't easy now either. But that is our calling. And I hope that the next few weeks will equip us to do that.

Well, let me give you a general direction where we're going over the next 20 minutes or so. We're going to start by looking at the two problems that Paul addresses in the chapter. Both of them are serious.

[3 : 25] And we need to grasp why that is and to check our own thinking in that area. Secondly, we'll look and think through Paul's action plan and consider how it might apply to us.

That may well make us feel a little uncomfortable, but it is important. Lastly, we'll end with a few thoughts on Paul's motivation. And we'll see how the story ends.

And there is hope and encouragement for us. So that's where we're going. Firstly, though, those two sins that need addressing. The first one is easy to spot, isn't it?

It's there in verse one. Paul writes, It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate. A man is sleeping with his father's wife.

Everyone seemed to know it because the news had reached even Paul. And at this point, he was probably several hundred miles away that the church in Corinth had a major sexual scandal.

[4 : 25] And it wasn't that as if something had happened on a crazy night out, just a moment of when all the guards came down. That would still be wrong.

But what we have here is a clear decision to ignore God's commands, refuse to stop and repent. The word Paul uses in the passage for sexual immorality is a Greek word, porneia.

It's a general word covering all kinds of sexual activity that run contrary to God's commands. Turn to Leviticus chapter 18 and you'll read there a long list of sexual relationships that are prohibited by God.

And from the time of the apostles right through church history to today, the church has held those to be God's enduring commands. And in reference to what's going on in Corinth, chapter eight makes it absolutely clear.

Sorry, verse eight in Leviticus 18 says this. Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife.

That's pretty clear, isn't it? What was going on in Corinth was against God's laws.

[5 : 31] The language makes it clear that the woman is the man's stepmother, not his natural mother. We're not told whether his father had died or whether his father had divorced this woman. Actually, that's immaterial.

What was going on, nevertheless, was clearly against God's commands. And interestingly for a society which had very few moral standards when it came to sex, even the Greeks thought this kind of behaviour going on in the church was beyond the pale.

It was something that was against Roman law. The great Roman orator, Cicero, had said that this kind of behaviour was unbelievable. It was impossible that anyone would behave like this.

So, shockingly, on this instance, the church was more immoral than a very immoral city. Now, maybe the idea that a pagan society would have any sexual taboos is a bit of a surprise to us.

But, of course, they did. Because every society does. Every society that has ever been has had its own red lines prohibiting certain types of intimate relationship.

[6 : 38] And incensed is one of those red lines today. You can think of others, I'm sure. But for whatever reason, and we'll mull on that shortly, the Corinthian church had decided to turn a blind eye on God's clear command and to draw their red lines somewhere else.

And that was a scandal, both to Paul and to the wider culture of Corinth. So that brings us to our first challenge. What are our red lines around this issue?

Or maybe more importantly, whose red lines will we take to be our own? Will we, as God's people, stay with the clear teaching of God's word to us in Scripture and the church's historic teaching on this subject?

Or will we bend a little? Or, like Corinth, will we want to bend a lot and go further still? Paul is clear that the Corinthians had already gone way too far.

What about us? Well, the behaviour of one of its members is not the only issue, sadly. All of us, all Christians, battle with temptation and sin in this world.

[7 : 44] And the truth is that all of us, from time to time, fail to resist and give in. Sometimes we sin in spectacular and painful ways. The problem for Paul is not only this ungodly relationship is ongoing, that there is no intention of stopping.

His problem lies also with the way the church reacts to it. Verse 2, a man is sleeping with his father's wife and you are proud. Other translations have the word as smug or complacent.

But the image is still the same, isn't it? They are seeing what this man is doing and it's as if the church in Corinth had posted it on their Facebook page.

Look what's going on here. Isn't that great? We're thinking this is something to be celebrated. Well, why on earth would the church respond like that? Some have suggested that the Corinthians have completely misunderstood the freedom that Christians have.

That we are not any longer under law, we are under grace. Well, that's true. It's true too that we're not saved by our good works, but saved by faith. But that doesn't mean, as the Corinthians may have been thinking, that how we live doesn't matter.

[9 : 01] We'll think more about that next Sunday. Others have suggested that this issue has more to do with what was going on in the early chapters. That the Corinthian church, as we found, has

been racked by division and factions.

That they are having been amazingly wealthy and well-connected. Those positions of power, they wanted to hold on to them. And it may have been that this woman or this man were either so well-connected and wealthy, they didn't want to rock the boat.

Or perhaps this man was one of the leaders of one of the powerful factions in the church. And so with that position, he was able to get the church to change its point of view.

But Paul was having none of that. Whatever their reasons, they simply weren't good enough. The Corinthians should have known better. And by now, they should have dealt with it in a way that demonstrated to the world outside and to the church family that this kind of behaviour is not acceptable for anyone who is following Jesus.

So there were two sins that needed addressing. The ongoing public sinful relationship and the smug gloating about it in the church. So what was Paul's answer?

[10:14] Well, the end of verse 2 gives us that first inkling, doesn't it? What does Paul want the church to do? Shouldn't you, he says, shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?

The church should have been grieved over the man's sin. And presumably, because there was no evidence of any desire to repent and change, by now they should have put him out of the church. He says the same thing at the end of the passage. And then in verse 5, even more dramatically, this man should be handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.

Those are pretty strong words, aren't they? That is powerful language. But although interpretations of verse 5 have varied over time, the consensus seems to be that Paul is no longer, he's speaking here about no longer counting the man as if he were part of God's family.

Treating him now as if he is an unbeliever. Making it very clear to them that whilst they persist in this sin, they no longer have the benefit of thinking that they belong to Jesus.

[11:23] And that should be a shocking thing. Think back to our church weekend at home. We spent a bit of time, didn't we, in Ephesians chapters 1 and 2, reminding ourselves of the amazing blessings that we have of being part of God's family.

The peace, the joy, the belonging, the love, the grace that is ours. But this man, Paul says, should be treated as if he is no longer a Christian.

Put out of the church to show to him that without Christ, he has no certainty of forgiveness, no peace, no lasting joy, and no hope in the face of final judgment.

The church family should be the place where God's love and mercy, his acceptance and presence are experienced and celebrated. Being put out of the church family, cut off from knowledge and experience of those things, should be a hard thing for this man to experience because the world out there offers none of them.

Grieve over their sin and unrepentance and remove the man from the fellowship. That's Paul's two-stage action plan. I wonder what your reaction is to that.

[12:38] Maybe you think that sounds so amazingly harsh. Maybe you've got some nervousness about how that would work out in a church like ours. Maybe there's an element of surprise why Paul is so wound up about it.

Well, Paul is wound up. This is no small matter for him. It is vitally important. And it's something we need to think hard about ourselves.

But before we get to how that might work in the church today, let me say a few things in terms of background here. Firstly, I want you to note that Paul's issue here isn't with the sin in the world. It's with the problem in the church. Very often over history, the church has got very good at looking out there and playing spot it and stop it. Something awful, stop it.

Something bad, stop it. Paul's not interested in that. He says in verse 12, what business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? It's not that Paul doesn't care.

[13:40] As he goes and preaches the gospel in town to town, what is he doing? He's telling them about Jesus, reminding them that judgment is coming and calling them to repent. Of course their sin matters.

But Paul knows that until people come to Jesus, well, they're not going to submit to Jesus. Why would people in the world follow Jesus laws? They're in the world. They're going to obey the standards of the world.

Of course they are. Paul is upset because the one behaving like this claims to be a Christian and the church has stayed silent.

But Paul is also certain that the church should judge the behaviour inside the church. We get nervous about that word judge. Makes us feel very hypocritical and that we might be holier than thou if we are judging one another.

It's not about casting judgment and penalising someone. The word Paul uses here is about seeing right from wrong. And of course in the church we open up God's word and we see what is right from wrong.

[14:42] We should be able to see firstly in our own lives and then in our other brothers and sisters whether people are living in line with what God's word says. And if there is a Christian in the fellowship living with public, persistent, unrepentant sin the church family should notice first of all because they're able to make right judgements and then they should not turn a blind eye.

And underpinning these two things is the knowledge that to ignore these persistent, unrepentant sin is to call disaster. Firstly for the sinner who's in this mess. Because what do we say if we let someone carry on we're saying well it's alright I don't mind.

And if we're saying that from the church we're also saying carry on God doesn't mind. But God does mind. Sin is serious. That's why Jesus had to die on the cross.

How will someone repent if all we do is say you carry on that's okay. It also calls disaster for the wider church of course.

Because if that man's behaviour suddenly becomes the standard then what's to stop someone else behaving like it? Paul says that in verse 6 doesn't he? A little yeast can quickly work its way through a whole batch of dough.

[16:07] When sinful behaviour is ignored or in Corinth it is celebrated others start to behave in that way too. And as others are drawn away from Christ what happens to the reputation of the church well it gets dragged down into the gutter.

And remember what is at stake here is the eternal destiny of many souls. This is an eternal issue. It's about the eternal soul of the person in this pattern of sin right now.

It's about the souls of those who might copy them and the souls of those who will never hear the gospel because they look at the church and say oh yeah I know what you lot are like. I can see you're no different.

Why would I listen? That's why saying nothing and doing nothing is not an option for any church that cares for the salvation of those inside the church family and those outside of it.

And if you're starting to be a little uncomfortable in your seat right now can I just say I'm feeling nervous too. If I'm honest I find the thought of these kinds of conversations very daunting.

[17:12] It's not really the British way is it to interfere in someone else's private life. We're too polite. We're too nice. This is the Church of England after all. Not some weird sect or heavy handed cult.

But having said that if one of our number starts falling into a sin and persistently pursuing it whether in an ungodly relationship or in an addiction or any other pattern of destructive behaviour that goes against the teaching of the Bible surely the loving thing to do is to have a conversation with them to remind them that they already now belong to Jesus that they've committed themselves to him to remind them of that fact to remind them of God's love and mercy of his call on their lives and say come on you know this is wrong turn from it to have those conversations to be honest and to say I know this might be hard but I'm going to be with you all the way through that's what friends do to do otherwise shows a terrible lack of love both for the person and the wider church and isn't that how we would want someone to be to treat us as well as we sit here right now thinking of a time when for the grace of God we might fall into that situation ourselves what would we want surely we would want someone who loves us and cares about us to take us aside and say

Dave you're saying you're following Jesus but I'm not seeing that can we talk about what's going on because you need to turn from it brother and come back to Jesus I would want someone to do that for me wouldn't we all that I think we would of course it's got to be something that's got to be done carefully and gently Matthew chapter 18 Jesus gives us some good advice for this kind of circumstance but before we just turn to that briefly let me just say this if you're already imagining that I'm giving you permission now to go up to that person on the other side of the church and say oh yeah I know what you're up to you need to stop it now and wag your finger in their face and then go to someone else who you've heard a rumour about and tell them off as well can I say very plainly

very clearly that is not what this is about and if that's what's going on in your heart then your gift in this situation is to stay absolutely silent and well away from that person it's not what is going on here there is no room for arrogance or pride so what does

Jesus suggest well he says have a conversation with them one to one talk to them about the issue then if that conversation or perhaps several conversations doesn't get anywhere then take someone else along with you to show them just how serious this is now of course the tone of those conversations is vital they need to be done gently and humbly personally I think that those conversations are best between good friends who love and trust one another at least to start with because we're much more likely to listen to the pleas of someone we know who cares about us but they demand time and love and care so that the person can see what is in your heart as you bring these things to their attention you love them and you want to see them brought back to Christ but as Jesus and Paul both say if they refuse to change then according to Jesus according to Paul in our passage they're to be removed from the fellowship and treated as a sinner and a tax collector once again that sounds very bleak and harsh doesn't it well in the early church maybe that was slightly easier the church had clear memberships they had parts of their meetings where only believers catechised believers could join those who were on the outside of the church could be removed or were asked to leave at certain points we don't have that and actually as a church of England church we don't have a membership either so in our context what might that mean well perhaps it would mean asking someone to step down from serving publicly might mean denying them communion saying receiving bread and wine is not right for you right now that's a serious thing to do it is not to be done lightly but then sin and the consequences of sin are serious as well speak to them call them back and if they won't repent public stance so that people can see they can know themselves more importantly that they are separate from the church but here is what separates

Paul and Jesus from those closed sects and cults what does it mean to treat a person as a tax collector and a sinner well Jesus is our model here isn't he and what does Jesus do he actively seeks out sinners and he sits and eats with them in fact he is hated by the religious leaders for doing it he loved them spoke to them graciously kindly gently to draw them to himself his conversations were always honest there was always a call to repent and believe the good news it can't obviously be business as usual the way we read those verses from 9 down to 11 make that absolutely clear but this isn't about cutting someone off shunning them completely it's about reaching out to them speaking to them so that they can still come to hear the good news of [23 : 10] Jesus and be drawn back could a person in this situation still come to church perhaps after all what better place to hear of Jesus and his love for us than in church what better place to be reminded of the father whose arms are always open to welcome repentant sinners home it's a complicated thing and it is a challenge I found writing this talk a challenge I think in the past I've often imagined that what is best and I in some ways I still think this is true that each of us as we approach the Lord's table we must do so having checked our own hearts and if there is some persistent sin in our lives that we know is wrong that we refuse to repent of then actually taking ourselves back from that and working it through but I suspect having worked through this passage there are times when I as a minister need to step up to the plates and we as a fellowship need to have those conversations with one another getting to be a church where that kind of thing can be done well and lovingly isn't an easy process we will make mistakes we will say things in the wrong way we will get things wrong but it seems to me does nothing about serious and unrepentant sin in the life of believer is not caring for them or protecting the fellowship nor honouring

Jesus we must find some ways of speaking to each other about such matters so that no one is allowed simply to fall away because we haven't been brave enough to have a difficult conversation with them because the aim here and this is where we'll finish the purpose of all this is to draw that person back the purpose of church discipline for Paul is repentance and restoration that's what he's aiming for it's not malicious it's to bring the person back to full and true repentance restore them into the fellowship and the life of the church that's what Paul writes about at the end of verse 5 put them out of the church he says so that his spirit may be saved that's Paul's desire and if exclusion from the church family for a while might bring a wayward sinner to their senses then let it be done Paul's aim is the repentance and full restoration of the one in this sinful situation we don't want it causing pain to one another do we we want to be gentle and loving but if parents wanted to avoid their children experiencing any pain well they would never have them to the dentist because that's a very scary thing to do they wouldn't ever send them to school because being away from your parents on

that first time nearly always makes children cry and they'd never tell them off when they were doing things wrong but of course loving parents do those things because they do love their children and they want the best for them and they want the best for them justing here and wonderfully when we get to

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians it seems clear that Paul's words and the church's behaviour towards this man had worked they had excluded him from the fellowship for a while and he had come to repentance again and as a result at Paul's urging he was restored to full fellowship had gone through a difficult period but it all worked well that's how it's supposed to work the sin in the church of Corinth was serious so Paul had to remind the church of that what about us where do we need to be pulled back in line with God's standards the inaction in the church of Corinth was dangerous because of the danger it would do to the individual to the church and to the reputation of the gospel so how do we act with humility and conversations so that people are pulled back if someone falls into sin and lastly the end result in

Corinth was repentance forgiveness and restoration that is the pattern of the Christian life isn't it Jesus died for us while we were still sinners that's a pattern of the Christian life and it should be the pattern of church life for that is grace and mercy in action and it is a beautiful thing can we become a church where more of that is in evidence amongst us I pray we can Amen