

LIVING IN SIN

Text: 1 Corinthians 5

Read: Leviticus 18:1-8

1: Response

Wrong response: pride

Right response: grief & discipline

2: Why

The sinner saved

The church protected

3: In practice

The church as a whole is involved

Judge church members

Disciplines unrepentant sinners

And so: *Don't protect sin!*

1 Co 5 rev

Dear Congregation

Maybe we all know of people with a reputation for immorality. But you don't really expect to hear of whole churches like that, do you? I do remember hearing about one church though with that kind of reputation. It was apparently the place to go on a Sunday night if you were looking to pick up someone for the night. But you don't expect to hear that sort of thing, do you? You know churches aren't free from immorality – but you don't expect whole churches to be that way.

But you see from this chapter that that was yet another problem in the church in Corinth. They thought they'd become so mature and spiritual that the normal rules didn't apply to them anymore. They could even be proud of their freedom to wallow in immorality.

Point 1

But, as with their other problems, God sees things differently. ***Sin in churches isn't something to be proud of - it's tragic.***

You see those 2 different approaches in some Churches right now, don't you like the Anglican Church and the Uniting Church? You see folk who are glad the Church has finally come out of the closet.

On the other hand you have those members who see this is tragic. It's the last straw. Whole churches are considering what the future holds for them now.

But in the case of the Corinthians, it just continues their pattern, doesn't it? They'd proudly accepted the wisdom of their day even though it went against the gospel. And now *they were proud of their immorality* too. Again, it was a throwback to their pagan past. The pagan world of their day was full of immorality. Sex outside of marriage was seen to be as normal as eating and drinking. It was normal, for men at least, to openly have affairs outside of marriage.

But the Corinthians had even gone beyond that. The kind of sin mentioned here was even rare among the pagans. The world in general even said this was going too far. It was actually forbidden by Roman law. But that didn't mean anything, apparently, to the Corinthians.

And so Paul uses *a Passover analogy* to challenge them to do the right thing.

The original Passover in Egypt had involved bread without yeast, and so one of the first things the whole family would do at Passover time was search the whole house looking for yeast, and getting rid of it.

Which is exactly what we need to do with sin, isn't it – in our own lives, and in the life of the church?

When we become aware of sin in our own life we need to get rid of it – ask God to forgive us, and stamp it out. When the church becomes aware of sin that those responsible aren't dealing with, it becomes the responsibility of the church as a whole, through the Session, to deal with it. In Jesus we're a new creation. Jesus is our Passover lamb. He died on the cross for us, as our sacrifice, so that we might be saved from the slavery of sin and be free from it as children of God. God calls us to live up to what we are.

And it's not that the rest of us are essentially any better than the person involved - we're all in the same boat when it comes to sin – except for God's grace there goes each of us. And so we're to *take the approach* of Galatians 6:1, 'if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.'

On the other hand, *if that approach fails, we need to resort to tougher measures*. This passage talks about handing the person over to Satan. And that sounds drastic, doesn't it? And it is drastic. But it's

simply acknowledging in our actions that to the best of our knowledge, based on the life they're living, they aren't citizens of God's kingdom. It's an exclusion from the privileges and blessings of Church membership - the peace, comfort, and security that comes with knowing that you're a child of God.

Point 2

But *why go through this process?* Why feel that we have to exclude people from the Church at all?

Surely in this day and age we've learnt to tolerate people who do things a bit differently to us, surely we don't have to feel any more that we have to exclude them?

And that's true to a point, you only have to look at the diverse group of people that rubs shoulders in this congregation to know that that's true. We come from different countries, different backgrounds, have different ways of doing some things - and yet we all accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. But there is a line that shouldn't be crossed when it comes to doing things differently - and that's the line between godly living and sin. At that line, tolerance in the kingdom of God runs out. It's God's kingdom. He calls us to live on his side of the line. If we step over it, we're putting our citizenship in his kingdom under question. We're putting our salvation under question. And that's reflected in our standing in the Church.

And because God doesn't want to see anyone perish, and neither should we as his Church, formal ***Church discipline has the intent of seeing the sinful nature destroyed and the person saved.*** The hope is that as people under discipline are increasingly cut off from the benefits and fellowship of the Church, and are increasingly understood to be a citizen of Satan's kingdom rather than God's, that they'll feel the reality of that, realise what they're doing, realise their true standing, repent, and be restored to the Church.

And some of us will know cases where that hope hasn't come about. The person has stayed with the lifestyle that brought them to that point. And they've been lost to the Church.

On the other hand, some of us will also know of cases where it has worked, and the person has repented

before God, received forgiveness, been restored to the Church, and continues to be a citizen of God's kingdom to this day.

Another reason for Church discipline is to protect the Church.

Paul uses the example of yeast spreading through the whole lump of dough. The nature of yeast is to spread through the whole lump over time. And sin is the same. Our natural inclination is to sin. If sin isn't contained, the tendency is for it to spread. Over time, the whole church suffers.

It's like the old saying that one bad apple spoils the whole barrel. Maybe you've even seen that happen in your own cupboard. Leave one bad piece of fruit in a boxful, and over time it affects the fruit around it as well.

And so don't see Church discipline as a big bad ogre. It isn't the authoritarian policeman just itching to use his baton. It's the Church doing it's best to contain sin, bring sinners to repentance before they fall from God's grace, and protect everyone else in the Church. We don't always do it as well as we should. But if we didn't do it at all we'd be in an even worse situation again.

Point 3

And there's a few pointers in this passage as to ***how to do this in practice.***

The first is that ***it should be the church as a whole that's involved.*** It's not any one person's job alone – the Session, representing the congregation, oversees church discipline. And neither is it something that Session does in secret. At some point the congregation has to be made aware that a situation needs prayer. At some point the congregation might be told who's involved. And steps like excommunication are made public as well.

The second pointer is that ***we only judge members of the church.*** It's not our job to try to get non-Christians to live like Christians before they're saved.

And there's a couple of interesting things that spring out of that.

One is that *we are allowed to judge*. Too often Christians put up with sinful behaviour in others saying, 'But we're not allowed to judge are we?' But you see here that we are allowed to judge. We're not allowed to condemn as if we're perfect and others aren't. We need to accept that we're all inclined to sin. But we are allowed to judge.

The other interesting thing that springs out of that is that *we take a very different attitude with Christians than non-Christians*. We can have relationships and friendships with non-Christians who live blatantly sinful lives. After all, that is the way non-Christians live. Jesus himself was the friend of tax-collectors and prostitutes. But we don't live the way they live. We live in the world, but not of the world. We live exemplary lives as we do our best to bring our non-Christian contacts to Christ.

On the other hand if people professing to be Christian start to live that same kind of life, we begin to increase the distance between us. They need to understand that they're not living up to their commitment to Christ. And so we take the opposite approach.

A common problem is that we're inclined to turn that around. As Christians we often cut ourselves off from non-Christians because we feel less and less comfortable with the way they live, and then sometimes bend over backwards to justify the sins of Christians, even when we condemn the same thing in non-Christians.

The point is that when a Christian is putting up with particular sin in their life and not willing to acknowledge it or deal with it, the way to get them to begin to feel the consequences of their actions is to distance ourselves from them - not associate with them, not eat with them. We should pray for them. We should visit them to challenge them. But don't just keep relating with them as if nothing has changed. They're slowly edging themselves out of the kingdom of God, and if we're going to help them turn that process around they need to feel the reality of that – they need to feel the distance they're creating

between themselves and the Christian community. And it's not nice - we don't like it. But neither is seeing them eternally lost to the kingdom of heaven.

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And so isn't it great, then, when someone undergoing discipline, does genuinely repent from their sin and returns to the fold. We were concerned about what was happening in their life. They were heading off in their own direction. But with the help of Church discipline, like the prodigal son, they saw the error of their ways. And they returned to the Father. Heaven celebrates. And so do we. They're no longer living in sin. They're alive in Christ.