

1 Corinthians 4:18-5:13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 05 July 2020

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 18 to chapter 5 verse 13. Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you, but I will come to you soon if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power, for the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? 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 present I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, 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 go 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. 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.

[2 : 0 6] Paul is sending on Timothy to the Corinthians as his faithful son, to remind them of his ways in Christ. And Paul ends chapter 4 by warning those in Corinth who are puffed up, as if Paul wasn't coming to visit and test them. However, he will visit them soon, if the Lord wills. At that point, it will become clear whether the troublemakers in Corinth are more than just pompous talk. The substance, or as it seems more likely the lack of substance, of the puffed up troublemakers will soon be made manifest. They are full of pompous talk of elevated spirituality. But the kingdom of God isn't about fine yet empty talk. It's about power, about efficacy, about what is actually carried out.

These Corinthian troublemakers are like a product that promises the most dramatic effects and transformations on the packaging, in the most extreme and hyperbolic language. However, the packaging isn't the point. What matters is what effect the product actually has when it's taken.

They have a choice at this point. Will Paul have to come with a serious rebuke and judgment to them? Or will they take his warning, deal with the issues, and receive a visit from a gentle and loving Paul?

Word has gotten around of an especially egregious sin among the Corinthians. A man is having relations with his father's wife, presumably his stepmother. This is an ongoing situation too. It's not just a past sin.

It's the sort of thing that would be scandalous even among Gentiles. And far from mourning this sin in their midst, the Corinthians remain complacent and arrogant. They're proudly confident in their superior spirituality. They still see themselves as reigning like kings and being rich, even as this grave wickedness is being practiced in their midst. Such an offender must be removed. Paul, while he is physically absent from the Corinthians, is present in the spirit. Anthony Thistleton makes a strong case that it is the Holy Spirit rather than Paul's human spirit that is in view here. Paul and the Corinthians share the same one spirit of God, and by that Holy Spirit Paul is present to them.

[4 : 14] As present in such a manner, Paul has already pronounced judgment upon the man, and the Corinthians need officially to assemble together as the church, gathering in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and formally to deliver this offender over to Satan, with Paul participating in their judgment by that one spirit. This is to the end that that which is fleshly might be destroyed, and that which is spiritual might be saved. Delivering him to Satan is formal excommunication. It removes the man from the protective realm of the church, the protected realm of Christ's kingdom. It declares that such a man belongs outside, is one excluded, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

True excommunication is an application of the keys of the kingdom, and the keys of the kingdom are the powerful word of Christ that is entrusted to the church. This isn't a blank check of authority that's written out to the church. Rather, it is the task of proclamation of Christ's judgment that is entrusted to the church as his stewards. This is something that the church has a duty to perform in instances like this. When flagrant sin is committed, the church is responsible to proclaim Christ's word of condemnation, not creating a condemnation of its own, but delivering Christ's judgment.

And they need to act, as Paul emphasizes here, in the name and the authority of Jesus Christ. What is fleshly clearly refers to the man, but probably not merely to him. It refers to the fleshly character of the Corinthian church in general. They need to deal with that as a matter of urgency. Likewise, the salvation of the spirit is not necessarily referring to the man. Although excommunication can have a chastening effect that humbles sinners and brings them to repentance, the sinner may not be the chief person in mind here. It could refer to the spiritual life of the church, which would be seriously threatened if the offender was permitted to remain in it.

All of this is done in anticipation of the day of the Lord. The excommunication of the church is a temporal and anticipatory judgment by which the church formally and faithfully proclaims Christ's condemnation of the impenitent sinner, in order that the holiness of the church might be preserved and the sinner brought to repentance. Paul teaches something similar about anticipatory judgment later in the epistle in relation to the supper in chapter 11 verses 28 to 32.

Let a person examine himself then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

[7 : 05] One of the purposes of church discipline is to prepare us to stand before Christ at the final judgment. As we confess our sins, repent and seek absolution, we keep short accounts with God.

We ready ourselves in this way for that great day. Every week we present ourselves before the Lord, rehearsing for the final judgment. An excommunication excludes someone from the assembly, proclaiming their standing before God, or lack of standing, something that is evidenced by their behaviour and their impenitence. Some have seen 2 Corinthians chapter 2 verses 5 to 11 as referring to the restoration of the sinner mentioned in this passage.

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you. For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough. So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs. Paul wants the Corinthians to be clear.

In the church, no man is an island. The unaddressed sin of one man compromises the entire congregation. Paul's thinking here is deeply rooted in the Old Testament teaching. When a man like Achan sinned, even secretly, the entire congregation could suffer as a result. When an egregious sin was committed, and the congregation failed to punish it, the whole congregation would face the judgment. Sin is contagious, and its guilt is something that can lie upon everyone when it is not dealt with.

Communities need to deal with sin in their midst, with the utmost seriousness. Leviticus chapter 20 verses 2 to 5 expresses some of this. Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech, shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean, and to profane my holy name.

[9 : 27] And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man, when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man, and against his clan, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

In this chapter, Paul uses the example of leaven. This recalls the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. Leaven is something small that, when introduced, can change the character of the whole lump of dough into which it is placed. The cutting off of the leaven of Egypt represented the cutting off of the old principle of life that Israel had followed in that land. Jesus elsewhere uses leaven to illustrate the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees. It's their tradition that's passed on from one generation of scribes and Pharisees to the next, and each generation has that culture, that way of life, that principle, of behaviour that they have inherited from those who went before, and this poisonous principle keeps perpetuating itself. That is why the leaven must be cut off. Now there is a new cutting off that must take place. Christ is our Passover Lamb, and we are part of a new Exodus event. In the Gospels, Christ is spoken of as the Lamb of God in chapter 1 verse 29 of John. He is the one who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one who was crucified when the Passover Lambs were being sacrificed. Like the

Passover Lamb, none of his bones were broken. Just as the Passover Lamb was part of the deliverance of Egypt, so Christ our Passover Lamb is the one by whom we were redeemed from this new Egypt, delivered from the clutches of the Pharaoh of sin. To participate in this new Passover, and enjoy this new Exodus however, we must utterly cut off the old patterns of life and start anew. The old leaven is the leaven of malice and evil. It spreads that principle in our lives and in the lives of our communities, so that it ends up working its way out into everything that we do. This is the leaven of the flesh. Rather than living according to this leaven, we must purge it out and act in sincerity or purity and truth. This is clearly not Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, as he references another letter here, one in which he instructed them not to associate with sexually immoral persons. Here he makes clear what he meant by that. Not sexually immoral people in the world, but those who purport to belong to the church.

A task of judgment is committed to the church, and it is essential that it separates from any who are characterized by such wickedness, to the extent of not even eating with them. Those in the world are left to God's judgment, but the church must exercise judgment in its own house. Paul concludes with an allusion to a repeated expression in Deuteronomy, used for sins committed that involve complete expulsion or the death penalty, purged the evil person from among you. Deuteronomy emphasizes the same principle as Paul does here. By their very presence in the assembly, the evil person corrupts and their guilt is contagious.

If the congregation does not deal directly with the evil person, they will all suffer as a result. Paul lists six sins in verse 11. Sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness and swindling.

[12 : 47] Brian Rosner argues that these correspond with the six passages in Deuteronomy that call for the death penalty, passages that are followed by the same expression as Paul uses in verse 13. Richard Hayes notes that Paul doesn't say that, just as God told Israel to drive out the evil person, so you should do.

Rather, he simply directly applies the Old Testament command on this point to the church, as a word that is addressed to them every bit as much as Israel. While these commands are not being fulfilled with the death penalty, the church's practice of excommunication has a similar force within its life. A question to consider. Within this chapter we see various indications and expressions of the profound union enjoyed by God's people, along with exhortations to protect it from corruption.

What are some of the ways in which the fact of such a union transforms the way that we think about Christian behaviour and about ethics more generally?