

Title: A Divided House cannot...

Text: 1 Corinthians 5.1-5

Theme: Serious issues demand a serious response

Series: 1 Corinthians #19

Prop Stmt: The way a church deals with sin tells you a great deal about their theology and unity.

I was trimming my shrubs the other day when one of my neighbor's came over and we began to talk. Trimming shrubs is not my favorite chore, and I suspect that it ranks right up there with going to the dentist for most of you as well. I said to him, "I have heard of self-lubricating motors, wouldn't it be great to have self-trimming shrubs?" He said, "They have them. There are called plastic." If it is alive, it demands care – doesn't it?

People demand attention because they are not perfect. Relationships require maintenance. A church demands vigilant shepherds. When relationships are neglected, when problems and sin is ignored then church becomes plastic. That is, it tries real hard to appear to be something that it really isn't.

We are studying the book of 1 Corinthians. This is a letter that the Apostle Paul, under the direction of the Holy Spirit wrote to a group of believers who lived in the city of Corinth (**see map**). Paul had come to this city and had brought many people to faith in Christ by his preaching of the gospel. The church that was organized under him started to fracture and splint after he left. If a church does not live out its unity in the gospel, then it cannot stand together when it is faced with some of the problems that it will inevitably encounter. Word of these problems eventually made their way to Paul who was unable to return immediately.

Paul wrote this letter to this church that he loved so much, but was in danger of being consumed by its problems. The church was facing possible disintegration from the inside out (10.11-13) and Paul knew that a long visit was necessary to sort things out, but since he could not get there right away, he wrote this letter to address some things until he could come. Here is what we have studied so far, and what we are going to study for the remainder of this year. **SLIDE UP**

**Dealing with Divisions**

**1 Cor. 1.10-4.21**

(through the gospel)

We have to go with God's Wisdom

We have to go with God's Ways

**Dealing with Immorality**

**1 Cor. 5.1-13**

**Dealing with Lawsuits**

**1 Cor. 6.1-8**

**Dealing with a Sin-cursed World**

**1 Cor. 6.9-20**

**Dealing with Marriage Issues**

**1 Cor. 7.1-40**

So, even though we are starting the second major section of this book, you can easily see the connection that Paul has made in this letter between the foundational problem of division in the church and the ongoing challenge of dealing with other issues as they arise. There are times when the problems that arise in the church are clear cut. There is no question whether it is right or wrong. There are also times when issues arise in the church which are not clear cut. The church in Corinth was facing both types of problems. One of the things that we learn from this book is that when there is a clear-cut issue, Paul responds decisively and clearly. When the issue is not so clear cut, Paul gives to us a series of principles that we have to work through. The problem in view here in chapter 5 is very clear. In fact, you can tell by how Paul writes that he is astounded at the nature of this problem. In other words, “I can’t believe that I am writing about this problem.” What has happened to you? Immorality is bad enough but this is outrageous! What was going on? There was a man in the church who was having an illicit sexual relationship with his step-mother and the church was doing nothing about it. It is very possible that these two had even married, though we can’t be certain of that from the text. But this relationship nonetheless was something that even the godless culture of Corinth did not tolerate and had laws that made this a civil crime<sup>1</sup> and here the church was acting indifferent about it. Paul is astounded. How can you pretend as if everything is fine?

Now, before we dig into this a little deeper, I want to make a couple of observations: First of all; Paul did not start his letter by addressing this problem. Dealing with problems of this nature are difficult anyway, but the church has to be united on the gospel if it is going to be in a position to address problems like this. Secondly; the church did not include this problem in their list of questions for Paul. Remember that when Paul was in Ephesus, ministering, he received both a visit from one of the families in the church and then he received a letter from the church outlining a series of questions that he begins to address in chapter 7. My point is, they did not even bring this up. They did not see this as a serious problem. Hold the phone for a second. Do people just wake up one day and begin living a completely immoral life? No! The church at Corinth was in a meltdown, but it did not happen instantly, it was the product of bad decisions. That is why I say over and over to myself and to others, “If you don’t want to go to Milwaukee, don’t get on the bus.”

## 1. **Bad Process - How not to deal with sin** – 1-2a

### **A. Ignore it. - 1**

It is obvious that they were ignoring it, since they did not even mention this as a problem to Paul in their formal correspondence with him. Why did they ignore the problem? Was it because this family had connections in the church? Was the man in question a popular teacher in the church? Some have speculated that he was, but I think if that was the case, Paul would have been a little more specific with that. But in any case, let me ask you a question. Are there different rules for those with connections in the church than for everyone else? No. Did this couple have a lot of money and the church was afraid that if

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<sup>1</sup> See Thiselton, p. 385

they really addressed this problem that this couple would stop giving? Perhaps, but are there different rules in the church for those with a lot of money versus those with little? No. Some have thought that this was an illustration of what we have called an overrealized eschatology. In other words, these believers were claiming that their position in Christ (declared righteous) gave them the freedom to live apart from God's ethics, as if they were above God's laws and had already arrived. They were looking for an excuse to place themselves on a different level than everyone else and were thinking that they had now arrived onto a new level, which deluded them into thinking that they were not only free in Christ, but they were free from Christ. I am guessing that this is probably more of a factor in the situation, but the point remains for whatever reason this sin was being ignored in the body of Christ. If you do not deal with sin, sin will deal with you. This point becomes even more clear in chapter 6, but the church cannot ignore problems because the church is God's courtroom for believers to settle problems. That statement may blow your mind and you are thinking – "Did I just hear him right?" So, let me say it again. The church is the courtroom that God has established for his children to get their problems resolved. You cannot go to court against another believer until you have attempted to solve the problem first by going to the proper people in the church. Now, since God set it up this way, what happens if the church does not do her job? Well, what happens if any court does not do its job?

Paul is astounded in v.2 – "And you are proud!" This word has the idea of remaining complacent. Not only have they ignored this problem, but when you ignore something long enough, you begin to accept it. Let's say that this man, who was obviously a member of the church, shows up in church with this lady. What should the church do? Now, what do I mean by the church? I mean – you! What if you take the "whatever" path? The "whatever" path is the path that says, "hey whatever" about life or other people – "to each his own." That does not work in the church. But, if that is the path that you take, and no one says anything, then you have just set into motion a very hypocritical process. If you ignore sin, then how can you say anything about it later on? If no one addresses this, then what do you say when this man and this lady want to be part of your home fellowship group? How do you explain to your kids that it isn't right, but we aren't going to say anything and accept it? How do you address sexual purity to students who are listening to what you say, but looking at what is going on?

#### **B. Accept it. – 2a**

When you live with a problem long enough, you accept a new definition of "normal." If you are diagnosed with an illness, the initial shock wears off and the treatment plan becomes what "life" is. That is what happened in this church. They did not address this problem and if you do not address something in a timely fashion, then it becomes so much more difficult to address it later on. Instead of accepting this situation as being ok, the believers should have been filled with grief. This is the language of a person who is at a funeral for a dear family member. When the church community responds to sin with the appropriate seriousness and gravity, then hopefully, the person who is caught up in the sin realizes that what he or she is doing is very wrong.

Sin is blinding. That is why I say it causes “brain damage”, meaning, you do not think straight. It will take you farther than you want to go, cost you more than you want to pay, keep you longer than you want to stay, and all the while you are thinking, I can handle this, I am the exception to the rule. Our desires blind us, bind us and then kill us. When you are caught in sin, you do not need other people pretending that everything is ok when it is not ok. If a church ignores sin, it will eventually accept it, and then it will find itself doing the incredible, which is defending it and endorsing it. Otherwise you condemn yourself.

### C. **Endorse it.** (v.6)

Verse 6 speaks of their boasting, and the context is clear. They were boasting about how accepting they were of this situation. They were calling evil – good. What sort of gospel is this? How can this be reconciled with the very word – church, (ekklesia) which means “the called out ones”?

## 2. **Biblical Process - How to deal with sin.** – 2b-5a

These opening five verses of chapter 5 present a study in contrasts. We have seen how the church at Corinth was failing to deal with a huge problem. Choosing not to respond is itself a response. But then we see how Paul calls upon the church to deal with this. Of course, this is more than just a record of what happened in Corinth. God put this in the Bible so that churches would know how to deal with sin. The first thing that we see in this text that Paul does is he calls it like it is. That is, he identifies it.

### A. **Identify it.** (3)

He calls it – porneia – a word that means sexual deviancy. The physical relationship between a married couple was designed, blessed and championed by God only in the context of marriage. Because this aspect of married life is such a personal expression of the unity and the oneness of marriage, God wants us to honor and guard this. If you are sexually involved and you are not married, you are in violation of God’s law. You are placing yourself under the judgment of God. When you look at your sin the way God does and you identify as He does, it wipes away the fuzziness that comes when we or others attempt to rationalize it, excuse it, or blame it on a circumstance or on someone else

Notice v.3.

What does Paul mean by this? This statement is much more than, “You are in my thoughts” or “I am thinking of you.” In fact, I think based on what he says in the next two verses, I think that spirit here ought to be capital “S”. In other words he saying that in the power of the Spirit, who is the One who holds the stones together, I am part of you. I know what you have to do. I have already passed judgment. This is a no-brainer. He calls it like it is, but then he calls upon the church to do what the church should do. They have to address the problem.

## **B. Address it. (4)**

Here is where it gets difficult. On the one hand, people say, “the church ought to do something about this.” And do you know what? They are right. But when you say, “So, since you are the church, what are you going to do?” That is when you get this puzzled look that says, - “You mean me?” Sin that is known publicly has to be dealt with publicly. Sin that is known privately, stays private. This situation was known to the entire church, so the entire church had to be involved.

By the way, when did you know if the church was assembled or not? The obvious answer was, when the people of the church were there. OK, how did you know whether a person was part of the church or was just visiting? Do you see why church membership is a critical issue for us? If we do not know who is in the church or not, then we cannot carry out this passage. So, the entire church needs to be part of the process that addresses issues that affect or are known to the entire church. Then, when there is no repentance, which is the case here, the church is called upon to remove the person from the membership of the church and treat the person as an unbeliever.

## **C. Eliminate it. (5)**

Being a part of a local church provides a measure of security and protection. How many times have you been considering some sinful course of action, and you found yourself in church, even reluctantly, but here you were and you heard a message that addressed that very issue that woke you up? How many times have you heard the story of another believer, perhaps something similar to what you heard two weeks ago and God used that to grab the lapels of your mind and you thought – “What am I doing?” Many of you have brothers and sisters in Christ who are involved in your lives spiritually, who pray for you, counsel you, encourage you and watch over you. There is a wonderful benefit to that. But, if you are not in the local body, if you are participating in communion and receiving the spiritual benefits that come from being reminded of these important truths, then you are a sitting duck? Hand this man over to Satan! If you will not learn the lessons of truth in a setting where people care about you and want to be gracious with you, then you will find yourself in an arena where the world will not be as kind and God will use the pressures that come from a sin-cursed world to teach you with justice what you refused to learn with grace.

Brothers and sisters it is a lot like parenting. If I refuse to discipline my children, not only am I aiding in their destruction, but I place myself under the discipline of God. If a church refuses to discipline itself, then it will place itself under the discipline of God.

The end of verse 5 sounds strong – and it is strong. Please understand that Christianity is very serious. This is not a game. Heaven and Hell are very real and eternity is just that. Sin is real and it is damning. Christ is real and He is saving. The Bible is true and we are accountable to it. But in the end of v.5, as strong as this sounds, it actually reveals the heart of God and the heart that the church has to have when dealing with sin.

Dealing with problems is no Salem Witch trial. It is not based on hearsay and holier-than-thou's. It is a time of serious and sober reflection of a church who has to deal with an unrepentant member by doing the most extreme thing that the church can in order to cause this person to understand the seriousness of his or her sin. The church is God's court to help his children get things straightened out.

### **3. God's goal – 5b**

This passage is a parallel passage to Matthew 18.15-20. In verse 4 Paul talks about being assembled "in the name of our Lord Jesus" and having the "power of the Lord Jesus present." Why do you think he said this? It is the same thing that Jesus said in Matthew 18, when he said, "Where two or three are gathered, there am I with you." That is not primarily a promise for a prayer meeting or a church canoe trip. When you need to deal with a problem and the church has to be part of that, it is gut-wrenching. It is sobering. I would rather have all my teeth pulled out without Novocain. What is the charge that we know often comes? "Who do you think you are?" We can all look at things in our own lives in which we have failed the Lord and we know that we are not perfect. Who are we to do this? We are the representatives of Christ. Being Christ to our world demands that we be Christ to our church. That means that we...

#### **A. Eliminate the sin**

Eliminate that which is fleshly in this man. Since the man is the focus, it is highly likely that the woman is not a professing believer and certainly not a member of the church. As far as the man is concerned, it appears that he has an attitude of self-congratulation and arrogance over his own sin. The goal is for this attitude and for his sinful actions to be eliminated in his life and for this sin to be eliminated from the church, since up until this point the church was giving comfort and aid to that which was an enemy to itself. If, the man gets the message – then the man may be rescued.

#### **B. Rescue the sinner**

Several years ago, a leader in a church divorced his wife and pursued a married woman in the church who divorced her husband so that they could get married. The leadership of the church was silent. The gossip and the conflict never ended. Once that pattern was established, the church was not in a position to address any other similar situations, so as they came up, the leadership was silent and the initial problem which is tragic enough, railroaded families and in so many cases, the kids were the spiritual collateral damage.

One day a man came into my office and announced that even though he was a professing believer, he was leaving his wife. Based upon this passage, I said, if you are a believer, God will come after you and may even take you home early. I said, when you hit the wall, call me, because I will come. Six months later he was in the ER of a local hospital and the doctors told him they thought he had about 6 hours to live. I got the call, he wanted to repent. He did, and not long after that he was reconciled to his wife.

In closing, let me ask you, “what sort of a church do you want?” There are three choices.

1. A church that lies to you and does not tell you the whole truth about God and His Word.
2. A church that tells you the whole truth but does not call upon you to live it.
3. A church that tells you the whole truth and calls upon you to live it.