

## ***CLEANING OUT OLD LEAVEN***

They say “you cannot judge a book by its cover,” and I am sure in many cases that is true, but Jesus did say you can know a tree by its fruit. In other words, sometimes what you see really does tell you about the quality or genuineness of something. That being the case, based on the “fruit test,” one has to wonder just how the congregation in Corinth managed to qualify as “the church of God.” There was a lot of ungodliness going on in that church and you’ve read about some of it this week in our *New Testament Studies*.

This morning we are going to look at one particular example of that; a glaring, shocking case. Open your Bibles to the **5<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians** and let’s read this chapter together. However, I must warn you before we begin reading; this is not an inspiring passage. It is not easy to read or think about what it is saying. There is an “unseemliness” about it that makes us want to ignore this passage and go on to more encouraging things. Of course that would not be wise on our part. This chapter is very much a part of God’s Word and if it is true that man is to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4), obviously this is something we need to chew on!

So, if you have found your place, brace yourself and let’s read again what the inspired writer Paul said to these Christians...

*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. 2) And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 3) 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. 4) When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5) 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. 6) Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7) 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. 8) 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. 9) I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- 10) 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. 11) 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. 12) For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13) God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*

Well, obviously there are a number of things here that require serious consideration. First of all there was some very seriousness **Immorality**. Having sexual intimacy with someone other than your spouse is what the Bible calls fornication or adultery. The word for “sexual immorality” or “fornication” as it is found in some Bibles is from the Greek word *porneia* from which we derive the word “pornography.” It is a kind of generic term and refers to any and all kinds of sexual-related practices. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus made it clear that the immorality can take place in the mind as well as it can in the act, and those who practice either are sinning.

The particular case that Paul was referring to was particularly disgusting. Paul describes it as something not even the pagans would do. A man was being sexually intimate with his father’s wife; presumably not the man’s mother, but perhaps a step-mother. It was bad that this happened at all, but that in this case it was one of the saints doing it, made it even worse!

The second thing that we see is that **THE CHURCH HAD ITS EYES SHUT**. Today the prevailing philosophy is “live and let live.” People believe they can think anything they want to, say anything they want to and do anything they want to. No one is supposed to say anything, or be critical in any way. Sinning has been elevated to the status of “civil rights!” Paul rebukes the Corinthian church because they were shutting their eyes to what was going on. Instead of mourning over the man’s actions and doing something, they were simply acting indignant and self-righteous.

The third thing that draws our attention is what Paul says the Corinthians should have done about **CHURCH DISCIPLINE**. They should have removed that man from their fellowship.

I am sure that for many people today, that is more shocking than what the man was doing! They say that sounds like excommunication; kicking someone out of the church! They say “You can’t do that!” *“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Jesus Christ”* (1:1) disagrees. Not only can that be done, Paul says it should be done. Churches that do not do it are derelict in their Christian duty.

In **verse 3**, Paul said, *“even though I’m not in Corinth physically, I am present in Spirit and as if I was there, I have already pronounced judgment on this man.”* Now let me suggest that Paul, as an apostle, was certainly in a better position to judge that situation better than you or I. In Paul’s mind, the matter was settled. This was ungodliness that should not be allowed to go any further. And so, even though Paul was not there physically, he wanted them to act. In **verses 4 and 5**, he says, *“When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5) 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.”*

We might wonder what Paul meant by the expression, *“destruction of the flesh.”* Whatever he meant, I am sure he did not mean what those in the Catholic hierarchy understood during the days of the inquisition. They literally punished people with racks and whips and starvation in their misguided efforts to keep the church pure from immoral people and false teachers. Because of what it says in verse 9, it looks like what Paul had in mind was the severing their

fellowship and association with this man. This would be a kind of spiritual punishment that held some hope of bringing about repentance. This seems to be what Paul was talking about because over in the **second letter, in chapter 2**, he refers to something that sounds very much like this situation. Beginning in **verse 5**, Paul writes:

*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. 6) For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7) so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8) So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 9) For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. 10) 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, 11) so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.*

The goal, which seems to have been achieved, was to bring this man to repentance, so that in the day of judgment, he might not be condemned. So what if everyone else closes their eyes and gives you a pass, if in the end God finds you guilty and brings His wrath down on you?

And then Paul says something that led me to the title for this lesson—**CLEANING OUT OLD LEAVEN**. In **verses 6-8**, Paul says,

*“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7) 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. 8) 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.”*

The imagery Paul uses here, that of the leaven and eating of the Passover lamb, is taken from the Jewish observance of Passover. One of the things the Jews had to do in preparation for the celebration of Passover was to remove every trace of leaven from their home. This even included the dishes or implements that might have been used with leavened foods. You can read the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> chapters of Exodus if you want to learn more about the OT background for all of this. The Passover lamb, which was a figure of the sacrifice of Christ, was to be eaten in a house in which all the leaven was removed.

In partaking of the Lord’s Supper with that sinful brother, Paul said they were eating their Passover lamb but they had failed to remove the old leaven from their presence. Malice and evil were present as this holy food was being served and eaten. The church was in effect insulting the very God who sent His Son to redeem them. The situation made it impossible for the congregation to celebrate their redemption with each other in sincerity and truth. In other words, as things were, they were not being honest with each other.

But sexual immorality was not the only thing that makes the observance of the Christian Passover impossible. Paul goes on in **verses 9 & 10**, *“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.”* Notice Paul identifies some other types of things that if people are doing them, you should not associate with them—being greedy, swindlers, idolaters, etc. I am confident that Paul would also include in that list those that he wrote about in **Romans 16:17**, who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine.

Paul says *“I’m not talking about not to associate with such people who are still in the world, but—verse 11, those who are called brethren.* He is talking about brethren who are guilty of these kinds of things, such as sexual immorality, or greed, or idolatry, or being a drunkard. Paul says, with such a one, you are not to even eat with them. Was he talking about eating a common meal, or was he talking about eating the Lord’s Supper? Maybe he means both, but for sure he means something! With such a one, no not to eat!

Well again, that’s pretty serious stuff! It isn’t warm and fuzzy. It isn’t all love. It isn’t something we enjoy thinking about. And yet it is God’s will, and it is what honors a holy God! To the world drunk on sin anyway, this seems too narrow, too judgmental, to “unchristian!” Some are proud of themselves that they are much more broadminded than that, but you can be so open minded that your brain falls out!

Paul says it is not our job to judge outsiders—as if to say *we can’t have anything to do with you because you are not a Christian.* Association with non-Christians cannot be avoided but even so, you have to be careful. On the other hand, because we are our brother’s keeper, it is our job to watch out for those we call brothers and sisters. And we must do so with a discerning spirit and with love. God will take care of all those outside the church, but we are to do our part to make sure the old leaven of malice and evil do not get a start in the church. Back in **verse 6**, Paul reminded them that *“a little leaven leavens the whole lump?”*

We might wonder, how many churches have been lost to ungodliness? I don’t have any idea, but I am sure of this, those that have did not do what Paul teaches here in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter.

Now what lessons can we take away from this passage this morning? Let me draw your attention to several.

**First, the church is holy**, and we must do everything we can that is right and Biblical to maintain that holiness. One of our memory verses this past week was **3:16, 17**, where Paul said, *“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy and you are that temple.”*

To the **Galatians**, Paul wrote these words in **6:1,2**: *“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”*

So, first let us keep in mind the church is holy and we must do our part and do our best to make sure it stays that way.

**Second, let us learn that what we may consider harmless, God may consider deadly.** We probably would agree that a man sleeping with his father's wife should not be ignored or permitted to go on; but what about porneia of another type? What about all of the couples today who are just shacking up? What about pornography? What about dressing immodestly?

What about the other things that Paul mentioned in this passage? He said the same thing applies to a person who is greedy, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler. What about lying and gossip? What about teaching false doctrines or causing a division?

Do you remember the story of Phinehas found in **Numbers 25**? Verse 1 says that while the children of Israel were encamped in a place called Shittim, they began to get involved with the harlots of Moab. Verse 2 tells us that it wasn't long until they began to worship the idols of the Moabite gods. God became angry with Israel and sent a plague among the people in which 24,000 died. 24,000! That's a lot of people who died! About that time, while the people were weeping and crying out to God, one of the Israelites brought a Midianite woman right into camp. Then one of Aaron's grandsons, a young priest by the name of Phinehas went and took a spear and ran both the man and woman through with it! Verse 25 says when he did that, the plague that had come upon Israel was checked. Now I'm not suggesting we kill anyone, but I'm saying God wants us to take strong stands against ungodliness in the church.

**Thirdly, let go away from this 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians having learned that true Christianity is not always warm and fuzzy.** There are some serious issues facing the church today; both morally and doctrinally. While we always want to be loving and kind and gracious and longsuffering, we must not be reluctant or afraid to see evil for what it is. We may have to make hard decisions and do things that are difficult. We may have to be willing to put our associations and friendships aside if necessary to faithfully serve God. Paul asked, "*Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?*"

The church is not a social club. There is a good bit that is social about it, but the church does not exist primarily as a place for us find friends and have a good time. As Paul said, the church is God's temple. We are His people, and as such we are to be holy, and we are to exhort and admonish one another to holiness.

Well, as I said at the beginning, this is a difficult chapter. It is not difficult because it is hard to understand. It is just a difficult chapter to read, and to consider, and especially to put into practice. But as we read and consider these serious things together, I just want to encourage you to always have that mind and heart that says, "What God says is true and I believe it and that's what I'm going to do." [Invitation]

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