

## B. Immoral Marital Relationship (5:1-13)

From the problem of factions in the church, Paul immediately turned his attention to another serious concern. It involved a particular individual in the Corinthian congregation, and most likely the group from Chloe's house also reported this situation to Paul. (For various reasons, it's doubtful that the letter from the Corinthians contained this report.)

1. The matter involved sexual immorality, specifically that a certain individual "*had his father's wife*" (5:1). At first glance it may appear that this was an adulterous affair, but Paul's language and the context argue otherwise. First of all, Paul employed a noun that refers generically to sexual impurity rather than marital infidelity, which is typically expressed by a different noun. Second, Paul's verb and grammar indicate an ongoing relationship, which is highly unlikely in the case of a man having an affair with a woman who is married to his father – even if that woman was not his biological mother. As well, the context is clear that the Corinthians were well aware and approving of this relationship, which meant that it was manifested openly and unashamedly; one could hardly imagine such a situation in the instance of a woman engaged in an ongoing affair with her husband's son (let alone an incestuous relationship with her own son).

The best indication from all the evidence is that this particular individual was having an open, romantic relationship with his stepmother following either the death of his father or her divorce from him. Assuming this arrangement, the next question to be answered is how specifically Paul conceived of its offense.

- a. This arrangement rules out consanguineous incest, although that certainly suits Paul's depiction of a notorious sexual relationship rejected by virtually all cultures. (Note that Paul referred to this woman as the wife of the father and not the man's *mother*.). Neither can one make age difference between the two the issue; it was common in Greco-Roman culture for men to take much younger second wives, making it likely that these two individuals were reasonably close in age. Finally, the offense can't be adultery since there was no marital infidelity.
- b. One possible answer is that the man and his stepmother had failed (or refused) to marry and were therefore guilty of fornication. Another possibility is that the *man* was married and so was effectively holding this woman as his mistress. But in this case Paul would have likely used the language of adultery rather than sexual impurity. Moreover, neither of these scenarios seems plausible in view of the Corinthians' open approval of the relationship.
- c. The best answer is that the arrangement described above has *itself* been widely rejected by human cultures throughout recorded history. This isn't universally the case, but it certainly was under Jewish law (cf. Leviticus 18:8; Deuteronomy 27:20; note that the law of the *redeemer kinsman* didn't allow for a man to marry his stepmother – Deuteronomy 25:5) and in many Gentile cultures. The crucial question here is whether such marital arrangements were outlawed (or at least frowned upon) by the Greco-Roman culture of first-century Corinth (ref. 5:1).

In this regard, a second century Roman jurist named Gaius wrote: “*It is illegal to marry a father’s or mother’s sister... nor can I marry her who was at one time my mother-in-law or stepmother.*” Likewise a citation from Cicero (a prominent Roman philosopher, lawyer and statesman of the first century B.C.) points in the same direction: “*And so mother-in-law marries son-in-law, with none to bless, none to sanction the union, and amid nought but general foreboding. Oh! To think of the woman’s sin, unbelievable, unheard of in all experience save for this single instance!*” Cicero’s scenario isn’t identical to the one Paul was addressing, but it falls into the same general class of marital arrangements.

2. Paul rightly found fault with the man himself, but he equally indicted the whole Corinthian congregation (5:2). What ought to have provoked deep grief and vexation in their hearts was met with happy acceptance. The Corinthian believers were abiding what their pagan countrymen would not, and that alone demonstrated the gravity of their offense. If Greco-Roman culture in general gave a wink and nod to all manner of sexual activity, Corinth virtually enshrined it. The Corinthian believers resided in a city notorious throughout the empire for its unbridled expressions of sexuality, so much so that Corinth became a well-known virtual metaphor for sexual sin.

God intended the saints at Corinth to testify to His Son and His gospel by bearing His fragrance in their city; by this relationship and their disposition toward it, the Corinthian church was standing together with their pagan countrymen in testimony against the gospel. As with their divisions, so with this situation: The Corinthians were effectively bearing their own fragrance – the fragrance of the natural man – and so lying against the truth of the gospel of new creation and their participation in it. They were “walking like mere men” (3:3) and Paul recognized this to be, at bottom, a matter of *arrogance*.

By again raising the subject of arrogance (4:6, 18-19), Paul was indicating that he regarded the present issue to be another manifestation of natural wisdom. If the Corinthians’ factions displayed the arrogance that is the hallmark of the natural mind, so did this unholy relationship and the church’s response to it.

- a. Some have conceived of this arrogance in terms of a high-handed disregard for God’s authority and standards. The idea is that the Corinthians knew exactly what they should have done but stubbornly refused to do so. This is a convenient interpretation, but one that is superficial and short-sighted. More than that, it fails to capture the real issue and so misses the serious implication for all believers.
- b. Paul has linked this notion of arrogance with the intrinsic way the natural mind functions. He was speaking of arrogance in terms of its essential pathology, not its symptomatic expressions in things such as boasting or bravado. It speaks to the quality of being *full of oneself* (literally, self-inflated or “puffed up”), and thus reflects the self-orbiting frame of reference which defines man in his alienation from God, and which also marks Christians who fail to employ the mind of Christ (the “spiritual mind” – 2:14-3:3).

As with their factions, so here: The Corinthian arrogance was not high-handed rebellion; *it was that they were perceiving and appraising this particular situation with natural minds*. Had they been viewing things with a spiritual mind as Paul was, their hearts would have matched his in vexed sorrow rather than happy acceptance. They regarded their factional alignments as evidence of their wisdom and maturity, and so it was with this relationship between a member of their body and his stepmother. The Corinthians weren't refusing to condemn what they knew to be unholy; *they believed their approval showed mature and wise understanding and they praised themselves for it* (5:6).

- b. A spiritual mind applied to this situation would have left the Corinthians deeply grieved, but it would also have moved them to expel the immoral brother from their congregation. This was Paul's judgment in the Spirit, and he didn't need to be present or investigate further to know that this is what Christ required (5:3-5).

These verses are challenging and subject to nuanced interpretation. The primary difficulty lies in the relationship between Paul's various clauses and phrases, especially those in verse 4. But however they are related, the basic meaning remains the same: Paul wasn't physically present with the Corinthians, but he was with them in spirit. Most importantly, he was present with them in the power of Christ Himself – the One who is Lord of His Church (“our Lord Jesus”), and it was in His authority (“the name of our Lord Jesus”) and power that the church was to assemble and carry out the Lord's will as Paul discerned and prescribed it.

3. Assessing the situation with the mind of Christ and acting in His authority and power, Paul had already expelled the offender from the assembly and the Corinthians were to see his determination realized. *In this, too, they were to be imitators of him* (ref. again 4:14-16). Paul wasn't directing them to take their own action; they were to act on his behalf, carrying out his judgment as Christ's apostle and their spiritual father. And that meant they were to act with their father's understanding, motivation and goal.

And Paul's goal wasn't *condemnation*, but *consummation*; it was grounded in his assumption that the offender was a true son of God. Regarding this man as a Christian, Paul understood this action as purgative rather than punitive; the purpose for expulsion wasn't to punish, but to *purge the offending brother of his fleshliness* (“delivering him to Satan” as giving him over to the realm where Satan's mind and power rule – Ephesians 2:1-2; 1 Timothy 1:20) with a view toward his final salvation on the last day (5:5).

4. Paul's judgment and determination reflected the mind of Christ Himself, and so were animated and informed by love (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:1-11). This was true with respect to the subjects of this expulsion as much as to its object: By insisting that the Corinthians carry out his demand, Paul was confronting and addressing the fleshliness of the *whole congregation* and not just that of the offending individual. The latter's fleshliness led him into an unholy relationship; theirs led them to embrace him in it. Thus Paul's prescription pertained to the entire Corinthian church, as did its goal of repentance and restoration. The offender needed to be expelled, but the whole body needed to expel him *together*, united in one mind and one understanding and sharing the same goal.

The entire congregation needed to unite in this action, but not as the outcome of a lengthy season of discussion and debate. Paul was calling them to implement *his* determination, not counsel together toward their own consensus. There was no need for discussion, and, beyond that, there was an urgency about the matter. At least two things contributed to Paul's sense of urgency: The first is implicit in the larger context, which is that this situation, like the Corinthian factions, jeopardized the church's witness; the gospel and its testimony to the world were at stake. The second reason is explicit, which is Paul's recognition of the polluting and corrupting effect of sin in the church (5:6-8).

- a. In making his point Paul drew on the imagery of leaven in a lump of dough. Yeast is introduced into one part of the lump, but from there – and entirely on its own – it extends its influence until ultimately the whole lump is leavened. So it is with sin in the Church, and notably in this instance the sin of *boasting*. Arrogance was still the issue in Paul's mind, but here he shifted his terminology and so his emphasis. The previous term (4:6, 18-19, 5:2) emphasizes the internal disposition of arrogance (being *full of oneself*), while the present term highlights the object, content, or expression of arrogance (that in which one *boasts*).

Paul recognized that the Corinthians' boasting would have a *leavening* effect on the whole church, and this is an important dynamic that needs to be clearly understood. In Jewish law and sensibilities, leaven represented impurity and, in its physical operations, was understood to have a corrupting effect. That is, once introduced into another substance, it eventually affects the whole, rendering it impure. Thus most of Israel's grain offerings needed to be unleavened (Leviticus 2:1ff, 6:14ff; the peace offering and Pentecost offering were notable exceptions).

The Law used leaven as a metaphor for the infectious quality of human impurity, but it also emphasized this principle directly by its prescriptions for dealing with offenders within the assembly. In many instances, such individuals were "cut off" from Israel (ref. Leviticus 7:20-27, 18:1-30, 20:1-22, 22:1-3); in others they were punished with swift and unmerciful retribution – not just to punish the violator, but in order that the rest should be fearful of doing the same thing (Deuteronomy 17:8-13, 19:15-21; 21:18-21; etc.). God wanted Israel to understand that the violation (the uncleanness) of the *one* implicated the *whole* and, left unaddressed, would have a defiling and debilitating effect on the entire congregation.

The reason God demanded swift and severe treatment of "sin in the camp" is that He understands its power to corrupt. In the case of the natural mind, *the tension between pure and impure always equalizes in one direction*: That which is pure never purifies the unclean; the impure always pollutes the clean. Moreover, the Scripture shows that this dynamic operates in two important dimensions:

The first pertains to the interaction between *individuals*. The impurity of one person affects and ultimately infects those around him. They are seduced and emboldened by the apparent rewards of sin, both in obtaining desired ends and in avoiding bad consequences (cf. 15:33 with Deuteronomy 13:6-11; Psalm 12:8).

The second involves the interaction between *persons* and *things*. This dimension is less obvious but critically important because it exposes the reason the unclean always prevails against the clean. It does so by highlighting the truth that *uncleanness doesn't inhere in things, but in the mind of the one interacting with them*. God sought in various ways to teach this truth to the sons of Israel, who couldn't see that their "clean" conduct and conformity to divine prescription were defiled by the impurity of their minds (Haggai 2:10-14). The natural mind instinctively looks outside itself to detect uncleanness, and thus the sons of Israel linked their own punishment in expulsion from the land with the disobedience of their forefathers: *Their fathers had eaten sour grapes, and now it was their teeth that were being set on edge* (cf. Ezekiel 18:1-32 with 24:1-25). Hadn't they been meticulous in their observance? And that being the case, they must be suffering for the sins of their fathers. They couldn't see that all their holy exercises were unclean because their hearts were defiled (cf. Isaiah 1:10-13, 29:13-14, 66:1-4).

Paul, however, understood that impurity resides in persons and not things, and he insisted that the saints recognize it and respond accordingly (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-6; Titus 1:15). He knew that purity in the Church wouldn't come from submitting to the natural wisdom of "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch," but from putting on the Lord Jesus Christ – from having hearts and minds fixed on things above (Colossians 2:20-3:11; cf. Romans 13:8-14; Galatians 5:1-25). The impure always corrupts what it "touches" – whether a person or a thing – because of the relationship between impurity and the natural mind. The natural mind is itself impure and corrupts other *people* by playing on their own fleshliness; so also it defiles *things* because it perceives and appraises them through its own impurity and makes them servants of uncleanness. Paul recognized that impurity is a function of the fleshly mind, and so realized that purging it from the Corinthian church required more than merely expelling the offender. That action needed to express the mind of Christ operating in the church: *The leaven of arrogance – not just a man – needed to be expelled from the assembly*.

- b. Paul communicated this to the Corinthians by drawing on the imagery of the *Passover*. Of all of Israel's "unleavened" holy rituals, Passover was the most rigorous. Not only was unleavened bread eaten at the Passover meal, all leaven was purged from the *assembly* of Israel for seven days. Yahweh's covenant "son" was to be wholly unleavened for the entire duration of the Feast, and anyone who ingested leaven was expelled from the covenant people (Exodus 12:1-20).

Such was the Law's prescription, and Paul understood that the Passover – in its historical meaning, particulars and symbolism – has now been fulfilled in Christ. He is the unleavened *Israel* as well as the unleavened *Passover itself*, and His people have been made a new, unleavened lump in Him (cf. 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17). The assembly of the first-born *is* unleavened because it partakes in Christ, God's true Passover. But, like its Israelite counterpart, it must continue to keep the feast – not as an annual, week-long ritual, but as the perpetual obligation to "clean out the old leaven": to *be* what it *is* in the purity of integrity and truth.