

Life Together

*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.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

To Eat With Such A One

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1 Corinthians 5:9-13

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; that's on page 954 in your pew Bible. Two weeks ago we looked at chapter 5 as a whole in order to discern some principles for formal church discipline. This morning however, I want to drill a little deeper on verses 9-13. Given the amount of confusion that exists within the Evangelical world around the issues raised in this passage, I think we need to read it again and to spend considerable time thinking through the specifics of how this teaching should be applied in our day and age. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰not 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.” (1 Corinthians 5:9–13 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

So far in 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul has been speaking to them about some of the problems that they have because they have foolishly adopted the ways and thinking of the world. In chapter 4 he sought to help them return to a right understanding of leadership within the church.

He compared the church to a Garden Temple and he said that Christ was the cornerstone and the Apostles were the foundation meaning that the job of the Apostles was to be square with Christ and the job of the church was to be square with the Apostles. We build up. We do not improve upon the design. We need to be square with the Apostolic Gospel and here in chapter 5 Paul begins to speak with them about one specific way that they are not presently square. They are not square when it comes to the matter of their associations. It appears that their confusion is somewhat wilful. Paul says:

⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—

‘We’ve already talked about this but you say that you don’t understand’. Sometimes people decide that they don’t understand as a way of getting around existing authority. This is like when your teenage son comes home at 9:00 am in the morning only to find you waiting for him in your housecoat at the front door. “Did you mean 9 pm? I’m sorry I thought you meant I was to be home at 9 am – that’s my bad. You need to be more clear in your instructions.” The Corinthians are claiming that they thought Paul meant that they were not supposed to associate with any sinners anywhere – which would be practically impossible – so they have put this entire teaching about associations off to the side and have operated according to their own wisdom. Paul now makes things very clear. He says:

¹⁰not 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. ¹¹But 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.

What Paul is teaching here is now absolutely clear. He is establishing two binding injunctions for Christian people:

- 1. We are to associate with the immoral people of this world**
- 2. We are not to associate with professed believers who persist in immorality**

That is the crystal clear meaning of this text. If all a preacher was supposed to do was read the text and explain the text, then we could go home right now. Job done. But the third part of the

preacher's job is to apply the text and in this case that is extraordinarily complicated. Leon Morris says about this passage:

“When we reflect that Jesus ate with sinners and that Paul regards it as permissible to accept invitations to eat in heathen homes (10:27), **the detailed application of this injunction is not easy**. But the principle is plain. Where anyone claims to be a Christian but leads a life that belies his profession, there is to be no such close fellowship as will countenance his sin.”¹

What this text is teaching is not hard to understand. The detailed application of it, however, is far from easy but that is what we are going to try and do today. Last week we talked about the principles of formal disassociation – that is part of what this text requires but it is not the whole. We need to talk in detail about the Biblical guidelines for associating with sinners and for not associating with professed believers who are persisting in sin. Paul has been very clear about the necessity of both, our job then is to discuss what that looks like at street level.

Let's talk first about some guidelines for not associating with immoral believers.

Guidelines For Not Associating With Immoral “Believers”

1. In the case of an excommunicated person, you should not seek to mitigate their shame through informal association

One of the reasons that the Bible commends excommunication is so that false assurance is penetrated and the person becomes aware of their need for salvation. Excommunication is the nuclear bomb in the Christian arsenal that is targeted ultimately at the false assurance of professed believers. We know that there are many people who are absolutely certain of their salvation who are absolutely wrong. Jesus said that:

²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7:22–23 ESV)

Jesus says that at the last Judgement there will be many people who were absolutely convinced that they were Christians who will be told by Jesus that they were not. Church discipline seeks to reduce that number by penetrating false assurance. When you as a compassionate Christian seek

¹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 89.

to mitigate the emotional impact of excommunication through private fellowship you essentially build a bomb shelter for the falsely assured to take refuge in. That makes you culpable in their ultimate damnation. There is such a thing as culpable compassion. I know that it feels harsh to tell someone they are not saved. I know it feels very unkind to tell someone they are not welcome at The Lord's Table. I know that, but I also know this, sometimes we do stupid things to make ourselves feel better that will have horrible consequences for other people. Let me try and present this in very clear terms. Sometimes we have to choose between being painfully aware of a person's isolated state in the present and being painfully aware of their isolated state for all eternity. You do know that we will be aware of people's isolation from God in eternity? The Bible says that:

²²“For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. ²³ From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.

²⁴“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” (Isaiah 66:22–24 ESV)

In the new heavens and the new earth – the eternal kingdom – we shall go in and out from the Holy City and worship and enjoy the Lord forever. We will also be reminded in some way of those who are eternally outside. We shall be reminded of the fate belonging to those who rebelled against the Lord. That is not just an Old Testament thing, that's in the New Testament as well:

And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.” (Revelation 14:11 ESV)

In the eternal kingdom there will be some sort of reminder of the fate of those who persisted in their rebellion against God. So here is the choice that every Christian has to face. You can be painfully aware of someone's exclusion from the salvation of God for a short while in the here and now by participating in the isolation of false believers, or you can be painfully aware of their exclusion for all eternity in the new heavens and the new earth. You can't avoid the issue entirely. It is a choice. If you foolishly seek to mitigate the emotional impact of exclusion, you make yourself culpable in the eternal destiny of false believers. Don't do it.

Practically speaking, this means that if someone has been excommunicated from their church, don't invite them into your small group, don't have them over for dinner and give a sympathetic

ear to their self justifications. Let them sit in the judgment. Let them stew in it. And pray for their repentance. That's hard. But being aware of their torment in hell for all eternity will be harder still. Keep the big picture in mind.

Secondly:

2. The principle of non-association need not extend to artificial avoidance and must not extend to cruelty and unkindness

Non-association means not inviting excommunicated people into your small group, not becoming their personal counselor etc, it does not mean that if you walk into Tim Hortons and they're sitting there that you back out of the store slowly making the sign of the cross upon your chest. That is foolish and awkward and unnecessary. Calvin made that point clear to his church. He said:

For if, on going into an inn, I see one who has been excommunicated sitting at table, there is nothing to hinder me from dining with him; for I have not authority to exclude him. What Paul means is, that, in so far as it is in our power, we are to shun the society of those whom the Church has cut off from her communion.²

Calvin preached in a time when this standard actually represented a severe relaxation of traditional practice. The Roman Catholic Church taught that excommunicated people were to be totally cut off, you couldn't give them food or water or shelter even in a time of need. Calvin rejected that as cruel and unnecessary:

Now, *that* is not strictness of discipline, but tyrannical and barbarous cruelty, that is altogether at variance with Paul's intention. For he means not that he should be *counted as an enemy, but as a brother*, (2 Thessalonians 3:15;) for in putting this public mark of disgrace upon him, the intention is, that he may be filled with shame, and brought to repentance.³

There is no need to be awkward and there is no need to be unkind. The goal is to love the person truly by convincing them of their eternal danger. Sometimes love hurts in order to save. That's the mentality that should characterize our behavior towards a professed believer under serious discipline.

Thirdly:

²John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

³John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

3. The principle of non-association does not apply to family members

Paul makes it clear elsewhere that believers have an iron clad responsibility to care for family members. He tells young Timothy:

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5:8 ESV)

If you are a Christian and your mother or father or sister or even son or daughter professes Christ but lives like a pagan that does not cancel your obligation toward them as a family member.

Those bonds are the product of God's Sovereign choice. He put you in that family and he put you there for a reason. By the way, this should comfort those very compassionate folks among us who struggle with the thought of a person under discipline being utterly alone in the world. They're not. They have a mom who will continue to love them, comfort them and serve them Sunday dinner. Moms, you can be at peace in the knowledge that the Bible is not telling you to stop loving your apostate children. You should be careful that you don't confirm them in their false assurances, but you don't need to stop being their mom. God doesn't require us to act against nature. That is not the application required of this text.

4. In the case of the intentionally unaffiliated, you should treat the immoral "brother" as a non-believer

This is one of the reasons that this text is easy to understand and incredibly difficult to apply. When Paul wrote this letter he could not conceive of 26 different churches in the city of Orillia. There was one church in Corinth – the church in Corinth! They probably met in homes in smaller groups and then also occasionally together as one big church. They had elders and teaching pastors and a common membership and that bears no resemblance to the facts on the ground today. If a person doesn't like our church they can go to the Baptist church across the street or if that doesn't suit they can go to the Pentecostal church around the corner. What that means is that people have figured out how to game the system. We see this all the time. People will be members here and then all of the sudden they will send us a letter saying that they don't want to be members anymore. No hard feelings, no doctrinal differences, just time to move on. It's a free country and if there is no accusation of actual sin, then the Board releases their

membership. Three months later we learn that Jimmy has left Susy and is now living with his secretary. What do we do in that situation? Answer: nothing. We can't discipline them because they are no longer members. Jimmy gets a divorce after a couple of years and he marries his secretary and they show up one Sunday at the church across town and apply for membership there. It happens all the time and it begs the question how do we treat the intentionally unaffiliated professed believer in Christ who is living in perpetual immorality? The text doesn't address that because that situation didn't exist in Corinth. That's the same reason the Bible doesn't talk about internet pornography – because there was no internet pornography in Corinth at that time. What then shall we say about this very common problem?

My inclination is to treat the intentionally unaffiliated as obviously unconverted. When someone tells me they are a Christian but they don't belong to any particular church I just simply don't believe them. Why would you not belong to a church? The reasons that come to my mind include: disobedience to Scripture, fear of discovery, inability to commit and rebellion against authority. All of which seem to indicate an absence of regeneration. Therefore I would counsel that you treat the intentionally unaffiliated perpetually immoral professed believer as an unconverted person. What that means is you try to evangelize them. You view them as in need of true conversion.

Secondly on this point, I think it also means that churches have to do their homework at the point of intake. We cannot simply credit the profession of every person just because they say so. We need to ask some questions. Have you ever been a member of another church in this town? We ask that in our membership process. If the answer is yes, the next question, why are you not now? We have to be aware that some people try and game the system. We are not loving people if we help them bypass things that God intends to puncture their self deception and ultimately save their souls.

Let's turn our attention now to the far more pleasant matter of how we are to associate with sinners. Paul is clear that whatever he is saying in this passage about discipline DOES NOT APPLY to the immoral of this world. He is very aware thank you that Jesus ate and drank with sinners, therefore, with certain guidelines in mind, we should eat and drink with sinners. What are those guidelines?

Guidelines For Associating With Sinners

Let's first of all, real quick, revisit the passage from which this principle is originally derived.

Flip in your Bibles to Luke 5:29-32. This is what Scripture says:

²⁹ And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. ³⁰ And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³¹ And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."
(Luke 5:29–32 ESV)

From this passage and informed by the many other passages that deal with the same topic we can confidently affirm the following guidelines.

1. We associate with sinners for the sake of evangelism

I know that using the word "sinners" sounds hard to some, but it is the word used in the text and I'd rather adjust my attitude than rewrite my Bible. To call someone a sinner is just to say that the person is still in their sins, that is they have not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ. Christians are simultaneously saint and sinner – sinners are just sinners. They are not yet made saints by Christ. We're not saying these people are morally worse than us – just to be clear. The point of this text is that Jesus associated with sinners – with unsaved people – in order to call them to repentance.

³² I have not come to call the righteous but **sinners to repentance**." (Luke 5:32 ESV)

A lot of young evangelicals hang out ad nasuem with unsaved people in unwise situations and never seem to get around to sharing the Gospel. That's not the kind of association we are called to. Jesus associated with sinners to CALL THEM TO REPENTANCE. He associated with sinners in the same way that doctors associate with the sick. This is not a mandate for sloppy association. This is not permission to hang out at the bar. This is no more and no less than the Great Commission. Go and make disciples. If you're not making disciples then you are not associating in a Christian fashion.

2. We associate with sinners with discernment

We need to adjust our thinking on this matter within wider Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism as a whole has bought into a radical and dangerously undiscerning model of association. The assumption among younger Evangelicals is that Christians are everywhere doing everything with their unsaved neighbours – that is definitely not what is taught in the New Testament. First of all, let's be clear that Jesus did not regularly hang out with sinners. For one thing, where does this story take place? It takes place at the house of Levi – otherwise known as Matthew – otherwise known as one of the 12 disciples. So Jesus wasn't chilling at the local bar – he was eating in the home of a Christian Apostle. Secondly, where did Jesus normally do his teaching – what was his recognized HABIT and PATTERN?

And **as was his custom**, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. (Luke 4:16 ESV)

And **he was teaching daily** in the temple. (Luke 19:47 ESV)

The testimony of the Bible is that it was the normal practice of Jesus to teach in the synagogues and when he was in Jerusalem he taught daily in the temple. Jesus was not a bar fly. He made premeditated, strategic forays into the company of sinners for the purpose of evangelism. He was most commonly found in the company of the disciples. All you have to do is read your New Testament to see that most of what Jesus said was said to 12 people. He spent the majority of his time with 12 very religious men. He spent a great deal of time with three very religious men. Jesus strategically, with purpose and great discernment associated with sinners. I am not saying that Jesus only rarely associated with sinners – please don't over hear what I am saying – I don't want to pull you out of one ditch only to land you in another. What I'm saying is this. The Bible commends caution and discernment in associating with sinners and you can't use the Gospel stories of Jesus to support indiscriminate, reckless, purposeless association with sinners – you just can't. Paul knew that and Paul taught in accordance with that. Later in this letter he says:

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

In 2 Corinthians he says:

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with

an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God (2 Corinthians 6:14–16 ESV)

Clearly while Paul did expect people to associate with sinners, he expected them to do so with discernment and within limits. That word of caution needs to be heard, particularly by younger Evangelicals.

Thirdly and lastly:

3. We associate with sinners as people of peace

Paul was very clear about that:

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? (1 Corinthians 5:12 ESV)

Our job is not to walk around our culture pointing at stuff that is outside the law of God. Of course its outside the law of God! These people are pagans! They're not interested in God's law so stop pointing at their stuff! Christians need to get out of the culture wars. We have this one exactly backwards. By and large Evangelicals in North America are judgmental towards outsiders and permissive with one another. The Bible says we have that exactly wrong. We are to judge one another and extend grace to outsiders. When we are out in the world, we're not talking about politics or what legislation should be imposed on which people – that's not our interest. Our interest is reconciliation. We say to people: "You are a sinner – I am too. We both need Jesus. You need to be reconciled with God through the life and death of Jesus Christ." That's why we go out there. We don't go out there to reform behavior, we go out there to save sinners.

But in here we hold each other accountable. In here we speak the truth up close. In here we do judge one another. We do it for the growth of brothers and sisters. We do it in hope of real assurance for ourselves and we do it finally and ultimately for the glory of God alone. This is not an easy teaching, I know that, but this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray.