

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Immoral Church Members**

*1 Corinthians 5:1-8*

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# Immoral Church Members

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the discipline of church members engaged in blatant, unrepentant sin. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Immoral Church Members."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 5:1-8:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. (1 Corinthians 5:1-8)

## Introduction

We are all familiar with the tsunami that hit the northeast shore of Japan last month. Several months earlier, however, on October 25, 2010, a massive earthquake set off a tsunami that struck

some Indonesian Islands. The tsunamis leveled whole villages, leaving hundreds dead or missing. According to the survivors, the deaths could have been avoided, or at least minimized. Unfortunately, the tsunami warning system—two buoys off the island—weren't working properly. As a result, they didn't alert the islanders to the coming danger.

Since 2004, experts have improved the tsunami detection network. The DART buoys (as they are called) measure wave height. If a buoy measures an unusual wave, it transmits that information to the shore. This system often provides the only warning signal for islanders to prepare for the oncoming danger.

Unfortunately, according to the report, the buoys “have become detached and drifted away. Sensors have failed. As many as 30 percent have been inoperable at any one time.” As a result, the buoys often fail to awaken people to the reality of future tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

When blatant, unrepentant sin enters into a church, sensors should go off. Alarms should sound so that the church does not experience a tsunami of destruction that follows in its wake.

The apostle Paul heard of blatant, unrepentant sin in the church at Corinth. He was shocked by what he heard. And so he sounded the alarm so that the sin could be disciplined and a tsunami of destruction not be allowed to destroy the church.

## Lesson

And so, in today's lesson we learn about the discipline of immoral church members.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. The Need for Discipline (5:1)
2. The Refusal to Discipline (5:2)
3. The Command to Discipline (5:3-5)
4. The Reasons for Discipline (5:5-8)

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<sup>1</sup> *Smithsonian Magazine*, “Did Broken Buoys Fail to Warn Victims of the Mentawai Tsunami?” (October 28, 2010).

## I. The Need for Discipline (5:1)

First, notice the need for discipline.

Because Christians struggle with sin in their lives, there is always the need for discipline. Ordinarily, Christians engage in self-discipline as they constantly put down the sin they see in their lives.

Occasionally, however, a Christian dabbles with sin. He enjoys it. He does not acknowledge it. And he does not repent of it. Over time it becomes a habitual sin. And even if it is brought to his attention, he may still not repent of it. It is at these times that there is a need for church discipline. And this is what the apostle Paul draws our attention to in our text for today.

### A. *The Notoriousness of the Sin (5:1a)*

First, notice the notoriousness of the sin.

Paul said in verse 1a: **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans. . . .”**

By saying, **“It is actually reported,”** Paul indicated his shock and horror at the situation in Corinth. He was astonished by what he was hearing, as he should have been, because of what was taking place in the church in Corinth.

He was appalled to hear **that there** was **sexual immorality among** the Christians in Corinth. The Greek word that is translated as **sexual immorality** is *porneia*, from which we get the word “pornography.” Commentator Gordon D. Fee says that *porneia* “in the Greek world simply meant ‘prostitution,’ in the sense of going to the prostitutes and paying for sexual pleasure.”<sup>2</sup> He notes that this sort of sexual activity was so culturally acceptable that the pagan Corinthians did not have second thoughts about it.

But the report that came to Paul was that the sexual immo-

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 200.

rality was **of a kind that** was **not tolerated even among pagans**. Whatever this sexual immorality was, it was frowned upon even by the surrounding culture.

So, what was the specific kind of sexual immorality?

*B. The Nature of the Sin (5:1b)*

And second, notice the nature of the sin.

Paul said in verse 1b: “. . . **for a man has his father’s wife.**”

The sexual immorality that was taking place in the Corinthian Church was that a professing believer was engaged in a sexual relationship with his step-mother. Apparently, his biological mother had died or was divorced from his father. His father had remarried, perhaps a woman much woman than himself.

The Old Testament strictly forbade sexual relations between a man and his step-mother in Leviticus 18:8 (*NIV*), “Do not have sexual relations with your father’s wife; that would dishonor your father.”

John MacArthur points out three things about this relationship.

First, the present tense **has** indicates that the sinful activity had been going on for some time and was still going on. It was not a one-time or short-term affair but was continuous and open. They may have been living together as if man and wife.

Second, since adultery is not charged, the relationship between the son and his stepmother probably had caused her to be divorced from the father. At that time neither of them was legally married.

Third, because Paul calls for no discipline of the woman, perhaps she was not a Christian. The man, therefore, being a believer, not only was immorally but unequally related to the woman (2 Corinthians 6:14).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 123.

## II. The Refusal to Discipline (5:2)

Second, observe the refusal to discipline.

More shocking than the sin itself was the Corinthian church's refusal to discipline the believer for his sexual immorality.

Paul lists three negatives regarding the conduct of the church.

### A. *The Lack of Shame (5:2a)*

First, the lack of shame.

Paul said in verse 2a: **“And you are arrogant!”**

Who knows what was going on in the minds of the believers at Corinth. Perhaps they thought that they were enlightened. Remember they thought that they had a superior wisdom and perhaps they believed that tolerating and accepting this kind of sexual behavior was in fact an expression of their Christian liberty. And so they were **arrogant** and had no shame for what they were allowing.

### B. *The Lack of Mourning (5:2b)*

Second, the lack of mourning

Paul said in verse 2b: **“Ought you not rather to mourn?”**

A church that does not deal with blatant, unrepentant sin is on the brink of a spiritual disaster. If the officers of the church will not deal with sin, then the Lord himself will visit the church in judgment and discipline.

### C. *The Lack of Discipline (5:2c)*

And third, the lack of discipline.

Paul said in verse 2c: **“Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”**

The Corinthian church should discipline the offender. All habitual, unrepentant sinners need to be disciplined.

“Unfortunately,” says Ken Sande, author of excellent book titled *The Peacemaker*, “most churches don’t employ formal discipline until offenses are so terrible, relationships so shattered, and patterns so ingrained, that the chances of restoring someone are very small.”<sup>4</sup>

It is vital that churches deal with sin in their midst. God is a holy God and his eyes are too pure to look on evil (Habakkuk 1:13). Whenever sin is not repented of and dealt with, it spreads. We know that is how it works in our personal lives. When we don’t deal with sin, it spreads like a gangrene and it affects other areas of our lives—until we repent of it.

It is just like that in the church too. The church must deal with sin. Otherwise it will spread and infect every area in the life of the church. That is one reason why so many churches split and die. Sometimes it is because they will not deal with sin.

And it is the responsibility of every church member—not just the pastor or the officers—to expose sinful practices in the church. That is not to say that church members must go around like self-appointed police prying into other member’s lives. Rather, it is to say that we must all be vigilant, first, with respect to our own lives, and then, second, with respect to what we observe in the church.

### III. The Command to Discipline (5:3-5)

Third, see the command to discipline.

Paul ordered the Corinthian church to deal with the sin in their midst.

#### A. *The Authority to Discipline (5:3-4)*

First, see the authority to discipline.

Paul said in verses 3-4: **“For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced**

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Sande, Peacemaker Ministries, in *Leadership Journal*.

**judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus. . . .”**

Apparently, the Corinthian believers were hesitant to discipline the sinning believer as long as Paul was absent. To counter their hesitation, Paul told them that **though he was absent in body, he was in fact present in spirit**. He had already **pronounced judgment on the one who had done such a thing**.

Ultimately, all the authority to discipline a sinning brother came for the **Lord Jesus** himself.

Paul was of course aware that Jesus had given the basic guidelines for church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

John MacArthur reminds us that “discipline is not inconsistent with love. It is lack of discipline, in fact, that is inconsistent with love, ‘For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives’ (Hebrews 12:6). The Lord disciplines his children because he loves them, and we will discipline our brothers and sisters in the Lord if we truly love him and truly love them.”<sup>5</sup>

### *B. The Action in the Discipline (5:5)*

And second, see the action in the discipline.

#### 1. What the Church Is to Do (5:5a)

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<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 125.



First, see what the church is to do.

Paul said in verse 5a: “. . . **you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. . . .**”

This is the final censure that is imposed on a believer for blatant, unrepentant sin. He is ex-communicated and he is delivered **to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.**

**Satan** is the ruler of this world, and so delivering a man to Satan is simply putting him back into the sphere of Satan. He no longer is under the shepherding oversight of the elders and he is apart from the fellowship and care of the church.

**The destruction of the flesh** may refer to death. More likely, however, is that Satan will be allowed to torment him, like Satan tormented Job. He may experience excruciating and painful physical ailments, but he will not ultimately be cut off from salvation.

Discipline must sometimes be severe because the consequences of not doing anything are far worse.

## 2. Why the Church Is to Do It (5:5b)

And second, see why the church is to do it.

Paul said in verse 5b: “. . . **so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.**”

The man will hopefully repent and be restored to fellowship. Nevertheless, if he is a true believer, **his spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord**, that is, when he meets Jesus.

## IV. The Reasons for Discipline (5:5-8)

And fourth, notice the reasons for discipline.

### A. *To Bring the Offender Back to God (5:5)*

First, to bring the offender back to God.

Paul said in verse 5b: “. . . **so that his spirit may be saved in**

**the day of the Lord.”**

I would like to restate the point I just made. And that is that one reason for discipline is to bring the offender back to God.

The goal of all church discipline is never *punitive* but *restorative*. This is how our *Book of Church Order* puts it:

Its ends, so far as it involves judicial action, are the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, the vindication of the honor of Christ, the promotion of the purity and general edification of the Church, and the spiritual good of offenders themselves.<sup>6</sup>

*B. To Keep the Offense from Spreading in the Church (5:6-7)*

Second, to keep the offense from spreading in the church.

1. Cut out the Cancer (5:6-7a)

First, the church is to cut out the cancer.

Paul said in verses 6-7a: **“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.”**

Again Paul states that their **boasting is not good**. Their attitude toward serious, scandalous sin was wrong.

In Paul’s day, when bread was about to be baked, a small piece of dough was pulled off and saved. The **little leaven** would then be allowed to ferment in water so that it would become like yeast. Later, it would be kneaded into the next batch of fresh dough to make it rise.

Paul is viewing the **little leaven** as the sin that is penetrating the church. That is why he says that the Corinthians are to **cleanse out the old leaven** because they **really are unleavened**, and they should not allow themselves to become infected with sin.

Blatant, unrepentant sin is like a cancer and must be cut out.

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<sup>6</sup> See BCO 27-3 at <http://www.pcaac.org/BCO%202010%20Reprint%20All.pdf>.

2. Continue in the Savior (5:7b)

And second, the church is to continue in the Savior.

Paul said in verse 7b: **“For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”**

The reason for removing the old leaven of the sinful person from the church is rooted in the significance of Christ’s death. He is **our Passover lamb**. The Passover lamb was the lamb slaughtered by the Israelites in Egypt. They put the blood of the lamb on their doors, and the angel of death passed over their houses and spared the firstborn child from death. **Christ has been sacrificed** and his blood is sprinkled on believers and protects us from the wrath of God.

*C. To Keep the Celebration of Christ, the Passover Lamb, Pure and True (5:8)*

And third, to keep the celebration of Christ, the Passover Lamb, pure and true.

Paul said in verse 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.”**

Paul challenged the believers in Corinth, as he does us too, to live the Christian life in **sincerity and truth**, and to have nothing to do with **malice and evil**.

### **Conclusion**

The church of Jesus Christ must stand guard against the corrupting influences that constantly are at work to destroy the church. And the church must discipline immoral church members who are guilty of blatant, unrepentant sin. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, the apostle Paul teaches us about disciplining immoral church members who are guilty of blatant, unrepentant sin. Help us to keep watch over our own lives so that we keep short accounts of sin. And help us, when necessary, to carry out discipline for the glory of your name and the good of your church.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, go and be the spiritual children that our heavenly father calls us to be!