



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

1 Corinthians

“Discipline from the Devil”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are continuing our studies in 1 Corinthians in chapter 5, and we're going to look at the entire chapter this morning. It begins a new section of the book, so much of 1 Corinthians is dealing with questions that the Corinthians had, dealing with various issues, problems that they had. Of course, we've been dealing with the first section of the book for some time, and the factions that were there – the party spirit, the rivalries that they had.

And Paul's finished that now; now he's taking on a new subject, and this is of a moral problem within the church. It's a difficult passage. It's not the kind of text one would normally choose to expound. But since there are texts that are chosen for us, since we go consecutively through the Bible, we come to it. We don't avoid it. And it's an important passage for us, though not a pleasant one to study. 1
Corinthians chapter 5:

“It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;

I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church?

But those who are outside, God judges. ‘Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.’”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this time together, the opportunity we have to worship together, the opportunity we have to read the Scriptures and study them together. And we pray that as we do that, you’d bless us. It’s a great privilege. It’s not only a great privilege, it’s a necessity that we nourish ourselves on this Word. It is a celebration, in a sense, as Paul speaks of a feast. It is our opportunity to feast upon the spiritual food that you’ve given us, and we dearly need that.

We desperately need to be men and women who feed ourselves on your Word. Otherwise we will have all kinds of difficulties. We read about that in this particular text, of the trials, the difficulties, the failure that comes when your Word is ignored, and we go off in other directions. So Father, keep us in your Word, keep us in your truth, and give us a zeal for it, a hunger for the Word of God and the righteousness that results from it.

Because as we study it and as we live in it and as we live faithful and obedient lives, we will show your righteousness to one another and to the world. So we look to you for that. We are reminded from this text of a number of things, but one of the things we’re reminded of, or we should be, is how frail we are, how weak we are, how prone to wander we are, and how, like all of these individuals in 1 Corinthians 5, we can fall like they did. We can stumble like they did.

So Father, we recognize that in us, and we pray that you’d strengthen us, and you would take care of us. That’s certainly what we are reminded of is our need to look to you continually. So bless us spiritually this morning, Lord, and bless us materially as well. We have material needs. We are dependent upon you for everything. We can’t thank you enough for what you give us, as Paul prays in Ephesians 3, you do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.

You do that even in the difficulties of life, because when affliction comes for us, for your people, it’s for good, ultimately. So even in the difficulties, there’s blessing. But Father, we have so many obvious blessings. Health, employment, friends, the fellowship we have here – all of that is a great blessing. We give you thanks for it. We give you all the praise, Father. We can’t take credit for anything, and we praise you for it.

But Father, for those that are going through difficulties, we pray that you would give them a sense of your presence. Remind them of your promises. Encourage them. We pray that the Spirit of God would speak to their inner man, their souls, with the encouragement that he gives. He is the Comforter. We pray that he’d strengthen them. And for those that are sick, we pray that he would extend mercy to them. For those that are unemployed, that he’d open doors of opportunity.

Father, you know our needs. We can look at the list of requests at the back of the bulletin, and recall the needs that many people have, but there are needs beyond that. You know our needs better than we do, so we pray that you would bless and minister to those individuals, and minister to us in this hour. Teach us the things that we’ve read. Help us to understand this better, and not only to understand it, but to then be encouraged, motivated to live in light of it, and live a life that’s pleasing to you.

So we commit our time to you and pray your blessings upon it. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] Late in the first act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a ghost appears. It beckons Hamlet to follow. Everyone, Hamlet and his friends are shaken, and they don’t know what to make of it. As Hamlet goes off with the phantom, one of them, one of his friends, Marcellus, concludes, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” Well, something was – a murder, unsolved and unavenged, and that becomes the plot of the play. I thought of that famous line because Paul could’ve opened chapter 5 in much the same way.

Something is rotten in the church of Corinth. It wasn’t murder, it was immorality, but immorality of such a kind, Paul says, “as does not exist even among the Gentiles.” Imagine that. The Corinthian Christians were behaving worse than the pagans around them. And then he explains – someone has his father’s wife. It was a case of incest in the church, of all places. Now, that’s what had been reported to him, and it disturbed him greatly, but what disturbed him as much, maybe even more, was the church’s response.

They tolerated the sin. They even boasted about it. “You have become arrogant,” he says in verse 2. Well, it’s hard to imagine that the Christians of Corinth could accept such behavior. They even boast about it. It’s somewhat like a physician detecting cancer in a patient, and dismissing it and leaving it, letting it grow. And sin will do that; it will metastasize. Paul will liken it to leaven. It spreads if it’s not checked, but the Corinthians are not checking it.

The Corinthians were not concerned. They in fact took pride in their tolerance. So what was rotten in Corinth was not only immorality, it was arrogance. The church had a relaxed attitude towards sin, and that is lethal, because sin will touch everyone if it isn’t removed, and that’s the only remedy – remove it. That’s the lesson of chapter 5: sin is deadly. Deal with it. Destroy it or it will destroy you. It’s a simple, very direct lesson, and every Christian and every church has to learn that lesson, has to deal with sin.

But this particular sin in the Corinthians church was especially scandalous and infectious, and it called for quick action. Paul calls it immorality. The Greek word is *porneia*. We get our word pornography from it. In the New Testament it is used of all kinds of sexual irregularities. But this was a particular form of *porneia* which even the pagans found appalling, and that’s saying something. They considered immorality acceptable. Generally, all kinds of immorality was acceptable, but not this kind of immorality, not incest.

Paul gives few details of the sin, but from the description he gives, the woman involved was probably the man’s stepmother. Paul calls her his father’s wife, not his mother. It was a relationship that was forbidden by the law of Moses, and censored even by the Gentiles. Still, this man in the church was having an affair with his father’s wife, and no one thought a thing about it. That, as I say, is what Paul found so disturbing, maybe even as shocking or more shocking than the sin itself.

These Christians had a lower standard of morality than the pagans around them. Rather than mourn over the scandal and remove the man from the church, discipline him, correct him, they had become arrogant. Now, you wonder how that could be, how this could happen. What would be behind such a casual attitude towards sin, and especially such flagrant sin? Something was no doubt behind it, and probably some form of bad theology. The way we think determines the way we conduct ourselves.

And it may have been a belief that freedom from the law meant freedom from all moral restraint. So they turned their Christian liberty into moral license. There’s some evidence for that in the letter to the Corinthians, our letter here. You can see it, for example, in 6:12 – Paul says, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable,” and there’s a lot of debate as to why he says that and what that might mean. But just the teaching of our relationship to the law can lead to some improper conclusions.

We’re not under the law. That’s true. That’s what Paul teaches. That’s the old covenant; we’re under the new covenant. We’re not under the law of Moses. But some people can draw the conclusion from that, “Well, I have no moral constraints, then.” We call that antinomianism, and very simply, that means “against law,” against the idea that there are principles of conduct. Because I’m saved by grace, I can live however I want – and that has been a problem periodically throughout the history of the church.

And that may be the theological aberration that the Corinthians were entertaining. That may be what is behind this. As I say, there’s some evidence for that in the letter. But this may simply be the consequence of compromising with the world. The Corinthians had done that. They were enamored of worldly wisdom. We’ve seen that already in our studies. They were a bit embarrassed by the cross. The gospel is foolishness to the Gentiles, and so they tried to mollify that a bit, change it a bit, downplay some things.

They adjusted their standards to fit with those of the world around them rather than with the standards of the Word of God. They began to adapt to the culture. They began to feel a bit urbane, and become proud of their worldly sophistication. Whenever we depart

from Scripture and try to appeal to the world by accommodating ourselves to its standards rather than the Bible’s standards, we will soon start conforming to the world and imitating it. And we face that every day.

We don’t have to be antinomian to fall into this kind of behavior. We don’t have to have a theological aberration, as I called it, to do that. We can recognize that sin is wrong, and that we have principles that govern our conduct, and we are to seek to glorify God in everything, and yet still find sin attractive, and subtly be undermined by it. We’ve always got to be guarding ourselves, always adhering strictly to the Word of God and imitating it, and imitating Christ and the apostles, or we will be imitating the world.

Well, the Corinthians, for whatever reason, had done that, and this was the consequence, what we read of here in chapter 5. Something really was rotten in the church of Corinth, and it was something more than just immorality, as bad as that was. It was worldliness. It was pride. It was conforming to the standards of the world around them, and they were completely comfortable with that. Paul wasn’t, and he wouldn’t let it continue. He took action. He did what they should have done.

He judged the man. He delivered him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, and instructed the church to carry out the discipline. That’s the instruction that he gives them in verses 3-5. It was the right thing to do. It was the necessary thing to do, and Paul encourages them to follow through on it by telling them that he would be with them in spirit. Now, he obviously couldn’t be with them physically to enforce his decision; he was in Ephesus, separated by miles of Aegean Sea. But he could be with them in a sense, in spirit, as he says.

Well, that raises a question – in fact, there are many questions that are raised in this chapter. I don’t think I’ve had more questions asked of me after a sermon than was after the first service this morning, and I may be doing that after this service. But that’s a question that’s raised is what does he mean that he’d be with them in spirit? Well, he would certainly be with them in his thoughts and his prayers – could mean that. But also, since they knew his mind, they knew his decision on this matter he would in effect be there by them carrying that out.

And by doing that, his apostolic authority was with them to carry this thing into effect. So all of that I think is probably present in Paul’s mind and what he’s saying there. So not only would Paul be there, though, but Christ also, because as they did the right thing, hard as it was to do – and it is difficult to carry out discipline in a church. To censure

someone, to deal with their sin – that’s difficult. But as they did that, as they did the difficult thing, he assures them in verse 4 that they would do it with the power of our Lord Jesus.

And when we do difficult things, but difficult things that are done in obedience, we have that assurance; Christ is with us. He’ll enable us, and he’ll bless us, as difficult as it may be, and he would do that here. So when they gathered as the church and carried out the discipline, his authority as an apostle would be with them, and the discipline would happen. This man would be given over to Satan. Now, that’s a chilling thought. It’s a kind of a chilling thought to think of, go back to that introduction and *Hamlet*, and thinking of a ghost leading us off somewhere.

But that’s fiction. This isn’t. Being handed over to Satan – what does that mean? Well, there are different interpretations of that. It’s often explained as excommunication; he was to be put out of the church and put into the world, which is the realm of Satan. He’s the prince of this world, and so he is to be put out into the world. Now, in one sense, we cannot excommunicate in that we cannot take anyone out of the body of Christ. We cannot remove them from the fellowship of Christ.

We’re in Christ by God’s grace through faith, and we cannot be dislodged from that. We cannot be taken out of salvation. The church doesn’t have that authority, and it will never have, and Christ would never allow it to happen; that’s what he says in John 10:28. We have eternal life, and “no one will snatch them out of my hand,” so it doesn’t mean that. But even if this is interpreted as cutting off fellowship, and restricting a person from participation in the Lord’s Supper, which is how we carry out church discipline, that alone doesn’t satisfy the description here, because that wouldn’t destroy the flesh.

So some have interpreted this statement “destruction of the flesh” as destruction of this man’s sinful nature; Paul uses flesh in that sense. It’s the destruction in a moral sense, but that really doesn’t satisfy either, does it? Not when you think about it, I don’t think. Why would Satan do that, because he’s the agent of the destruction? That would work against his purpose. He would then be purifying the saints. What we would expect him to do is just the opposite; it’s to inflame a person’s lusts, not help tame them.

The flesh most naturally means the body, and I think that fits the context of this dichotomy, flesh and spirit, that he speaks of here, in which case Paul was delivering this person to Satan for physical affliction – sickness, even death. There are examples of this in the Bible, of sin having physical consequences, of Satan being the cause of bodily

affliction. He afflicted Job, not because of any specific sin in Job’s life, but he was the agent there. He became the agent of God’s discipline in Paul.

He speaks of that in 2 Corinthians 12:7, that thorn in the flesh that he had. Sin is the cause of death in various individuals. We find, for example, in Acts chapter 5 there’s Ananias and Sapphira, and then we’ll read in this book later on in chapter 11 of those who sleep because they had not conducted themselves properly at the Lord’s Supper. So physical death is very likely what he’s talking about here; I think it is; having said that, Satan has no power over the believer unless it’s given to him.

But things here had gone so far, and they were so bad, so contagious, that extreme measures had to be taken. Tells us how bad sin is, and how serious it is. But the purpose of the measure that Paul had taken was remedial. We should remember that. It was for this man’s ultimate good. It happened so that, Paul says, “his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Well, what does that mean – his spirit will be saved? Again, it’s difficult. What it certainly does not mean, though, is he would be saved spiritually eternally through his own death.

Our souls are saved solely by the death of Christ, by his work for us, not by what we have done. He has redeemed us. We don’t redeem ourselves; doesn’t mean that. This may have to do with the man’s sanctification; that by means of affliction which would perhaps lead even to his death if he did not repent he would be delivered of this entangling sin. Sin is enslaving, and sometimes it takes this kind of thing to break it in a person’s life. So as harsh as that is, it would have prevented further spiritual corruption.

And it’s far better to go through that than to continue in this sin. And that would have consequences, good consequences for him at the judgment seat of Christ, so we can see this in light of 3:15, where our lives will be examined someday. Our works will be tested, as by fire, and this would deliver that man from difficulty at that time. What this does indicate, though, is that Paul assumed that this man was a believer. I think it’d be easy to dismiss this man as unsaved, but he’s dealing with him as a believer.

And it tells us that this is what believers can fall into. We’re not immune from this kind of sin and this kind of corruption. We need to be very wary in this life. We need to be vigilant about things. And so he assumes the man was a believer. I believe the man was a believer, and the health of his soul required that he be disciplined. This was for his good. But also the health of the church required it, because the church is a body, and when one part of the body is sick, the other part of the body is sick.

When one member is sick, it affects the other members. So the congregation as a whole was affected by this man’s condition; that is the reason discipline was so necessary. It was necessary for that man, it was necessary for the congregation as a whole. We cannot, cannot keep sin out of the church. We cannot keep error out of the church. We can’t keep heresy out of the church. But we can deal with it when it occurs, and we must. Sin is serious. The extreme and unpleasant measures Paul took here are, as I said, an indication of just how serious sin is.

This man had polluted the church. He polluted the temple of God, and God cleanses his house. He is holy, and he expects his people to be holy, and zealous for holiness. You remember Phineas? His story is found in Numbers 25. He’s known for his zeal. One day an Israelite brought a harlot into the camp of Israel – this is as Israel’s camp outside the Promised Land. They’ve not yet entered. They still have conquests to make, and they’ve got, what, 38 years of discipline behind them because the first generation wouldn’t do that.

The first generation sinned. This is the second generation, and here, in the midst of the camp, a man brings a harlot into the camp, a Midianite woman, and in full view of everyone. He did it, as I said, brazenly. He took her to his tent, he took her to his bed, and no one did anything – except Phineas. He got up, took a spear in his hand, and he went after them. Found them together and thrust the spear through both of them, and that act stopped a plague that was spreading through the camp.

Now, obviously, that’s not our way today – I don’t think I even need to say that – and the point of the illustration is not the spear, but the zeal, because one man’s sin affects the whole church. Something was rotten in the church of Corinth, and no one would do anything about it. They even boasted about it. So Paul did something; he acted like a Phineas. But it’s the responsibility of the congregation to deal with sin in our midst. Ultimately, it’s the elders of the church who exercise discipline.

They pronounce it, they carry it out, but the church has to support them in that, and in the remaining verses of the chapter, Paul explains why it is so important that we do that, that we support the discipline and not tolerate sin. Sin, as I’ve said, is contagious. It’s virulent, and now Paul illustrates that from the Old Testament and the feast of Passover and unleavened bread – two distinct feasts of Israel, but they were celebrated together. There was no separation between them.

They’re not the same feast, but they were celebrated as the same feast, and from that, he illustrates this condition. First, he again rebukes their arrogance – “Your boasting is not good.” Their tolerance of the sinner may have fit the fashion of Corinth, but it was not enlightened from the standpoint of God and his Word, and it was not kind. It was not the nice thing to do, to put it that way. It was not a kind thing for them to be tolerant of this man. We are to deal with sinners humbly.

I think we need to make that point. No one is so strong and mature that he cannot fall. We can all fall, we can all fail. Paul will later warn against presumption in 10:12, where he writes, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall,” because we can all do that. We can all stumble. In our most confident moments we are most vulnerable, and we can stumble and we can fall into sin. So there’s no ground of arrogance in any of us, and we need to understand that, and we need to be understanding of others. We’re all sinners saved by grace. We need to deal with those who stumble gently and considerately.

But letting a matter go is not helpful; it’s harmful for the sinner, and it’s harmful for the whole congregation. There must be care for the sinner, but no neutrality for sin. It must be expunged, and Paul gives the reason for that with an example that he takes from the kitchen. He asks them, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?” A little bit of yeast permeates a large lump of dough; it doesn’t take much, just a little bit. So a small amount of yeast, or leaven, isn’t insignificant, and that’s true of sin.

A little bit spreads throughout the church. Or to put it in the words of an old saying, one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel. Rot is never contained; it always spreads. Paul’s reference to leaven reminds him of the Jewish custom of cleaning out all of the old leaven from the house before the Passover. The first batch of dough from which they made their new bread was to be without leaven, and it reminded them of the bread that the Israelites ate before they left Egypt.

It was to be made and eaten in haste, so they didn’t leaven it. They didn’t have time for it to rise. They were to eat unleavened bread so they would be ready to go, and this was a remembrance of that; a remembrance of that whole experience of deliverance from Egypt. So for seven days they would eat unleavened bread. They were not even to see with their eyes – they were not even to see leaven in the house. So Paul tells the Corinthians, “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump.” In other words,

get rid of sin in the church and in your lives; start new and clean, and that’s something we do every day – deal with sin.

Live a circumspect life. Then Paul adds, “Just as you are in fact unleavened.” Clean out the old leaven, because you are unleavened. Again, we’ve got a question about what that means. What does he mean “just as you are in fact unleavened?” How are we unleavened – how are we without sin? I think what he’s saying here is “become what you are.” And it sounds paradoxical, it sounds contradictory, but there are these two realities to the Christian’s life.

We are first of all a new creation. We are saints. We are holy. That’s how Paul addressed the Corinthians at the very beginning of this letter. They’re saints. They’re holy people. And yet look at their lives. You wonder how are they holy – how do they measure up? He’s dealing with one set of problems after another. That’s really what the book of 1 Corinthians is all about. Dealing with issues, and problems, and failures, and yet he calls them saints; he calls them holy.

Well, what he means is they are justified. They are legally righteous before God. They are declared by God to be innocent. Now, that’s our position before God, and how he treats us – as innocent. As completely perfect according to the law, legally – that’s our legal standing before him. But what we are in principle, we are not in fact. Now, the translation here is “just as you are in fact unleavened.” That’s probably not the best way to translate it, because we are not in fact unleavened.

We are sinful. We’re sinful saints. We are a new creation with old corruption. We are saints that do not always act saintly. We are perfect before God legally, but we are sinful in the world practically. So what Paul is saying here is be what you are. F.F. Bruce put it this way: be *de facto* what you are *de jure*. What that means is be in practice what you are in principle. In other words, live up to the ideal. You’re justified, you’re righteous before God, you’re innocent before God, so start living according to that legal declaration. They were saved people.

They were supposed to be putting yeast out of their lives, not bringing it in. They were supposed to be living righteously, not falling into sin. He then gives the reason for that. “For Christ our Passover has also been sacrificed.” Now, that’s a reference to the lamb that was slaughtered the night of that first Passover in Egypt that saved each household with the blood that had been sprinkled on the posts and the lintels of the door into their house, saved them from the angel of death.

The result was that the Israelites were delivered from Egypt. They were delivered from that plague, that final plague that night. They were delivered from the land of Egypt. The slaves were freed, and they were made into God’s great nation. Well, that’s what Christ has done for us; that’s a picture of what he’s done for us. He is our Passover lamb. He has delivered us from death, from judgment. He has made us God’s people, and he has freed us from the slavery of sin. He’s freed us from the penalty of sin. He has freed us greatly.

But in the Passover sequence, Israel removed all of the yeast before the sacrifice was made. That had to be done before the lamb could be slaughtered. And what Paul is saying here is our Passover has already been sacrificed – it’s long past time to get rid of the yeast. If in the normal process of that Passover unleavened bread ceremony you took the yeast out before the sacrifice was made, well, since the sacrifice – in reality, Christ – has been made, it’s long time past getting rid of the yeast. So be about that business. Clean out the old leaven.

It’s urgent. It’s past time. That’s what he urges in verse 8. “Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” The Christian life is a continual festival. That’s what Paul is saying. It’s joyful – it should be. We of all people should rejoice and have joy in our lives. We should be the happy people in the world. But having said that, it’s also a sacred life, and we should live that way. And the food of our festival is sincerity and truth. Now, that word sincerity is an interesting word, and I’m speaking of our word sincerity.

It’s from the Latin, not the Greek, but it illustrates very well I think Paul’s meaning here. It literally means “without wax.” And ancient mason or sculptor would use wax when he made a mistake. He might be carving a statue out of marble and accidentally chip the nose. Rather than start over, which would be time-consuming and very expensive, he would repair the scratch by mixing some wax with marble dust. Put it on the statue and no one would see; no one would recognize the problem. They wouldn’t see the difference. But it wasn’t genuine.

So sincerity literally means “without wax,” meaning it’s genuine. It refers to a person’s motives; they aren’t mixed, and ours as Christians are to be pure. Our motives are to be pure, and then it’s to lead to action that is pure. We’re to be governed by the truth, and that’s how we know what our actions are to be, what our thoughts are to be, and what

our motives are to be. We’re governed by the Word of God. That’s what’s to feed our souls. These Corinthians had been feeding their souls on a bad diet of worldly ideas, and it was affecting their behavior.

It will always lead to bad behavior. If we fill our minds with bad thoughts, with improper thoughts, it will affect the way we conduct our lives. But there’s also in Corinth some confusion in the church about Paul’s teaching, and he corrects that in the rest of the chapter, beginning with verse 9, where he mentions a previous letter that he had written. In it – and I think I pointed this out at the beginning, I pointed this out before – but 1 Corinthians is really 2 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians is really 4th Corinthians.

There was a letter written before this letter in which he gives instruction, and then in between this letter and the one we know as 2 Corinthians, another letter was written. We don’t have those letters, but we have indications of them. And he points out here that in this previous letter he had instructed them not to associate with immoral people. And they misunderstood Paul’s instruction there to mean the immoral people of the world, so they stopped associating with unbelievers.

Now, that shows how mixed up the Corinthians were. They were worldly, but they were withdrawn from the world. They had let the world into the church, but they weren’t reaching out to the world. So Paul corrects this misunderstanding. He tells them in verse 10 that he didn’t mean the immoral people of the world, and adds the other types of people to that – covetous, swindlers, idolaters, all of these people. The world is full of these kinds of people. Trying to avoid contact with them would be – it would be absurd.

In fact, to do that, Paul says a person would have to leave the world altogether. In other words, you can’t do what you thought I was saying, and it’s not even advisable. It’s impossible. As Bunyan described in *Pilgrim’s Progress* when he described Vanity Fair, he wrote, “The way to the celestial city lies through the town where this lusty fair is kept, and he that will go to the city and yet not go through the town must needs go out of the world.” In other words, we can’t avoid the world.

We can’t escape dealing with all sorts of people. We work with them, we shop from them, we live next to them. We can’t escape the world, nor does the Lord want us to do that. You remember in his high priestly prayer in John 17, one of the things that he prayed was that the Father would not take us out of the world, but would keep us from evil. The world is full of evil. But it’s because it is, it’s because it is a fallen, wrecked, and ruined world, that we need to be in it, and we need to be associating with the people of it.

We need to know them. We need to speak to them. We need to model Christ before them. We are to be salt and light among the spiritually blind and unbelieving. We were once part of that. God took us out of that. Our task is to pass through vanity fair without joining the fair; it’s to pass through it without becoming stained by it. As the saying goes – and I grew up hearing this from my father frequently – we are to be in the world but not of the world. The Corinthians were not in the world, but they were of the world.

They turned it around, and they were tolerating immorality in the church. So Paul makes things clear in verse 11, and explains who he meant by immoral people. “but actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.” In other words, we are not to have any social contact with a professing Christian who is in sin. He is to be disciplined.

We’re not even to share a meal with him under discipline, because that would suggest that we then condone his behavior as being Christian. This is a standard that many today, many of the mainline denominations have drifted far away from. Immorality, again, is this word *porneia*, which is everything from fornication to homosexuality. Today, denominations are debating the acceptability of homosexuality among their ministers. The Episcopalians are even ordaining them as bishops.

That’s the result of apostasy. They long ago rejected Paul’s instruction here, and are not genuine churches. But that starts somewhere – that starts somewhere. A good church that goes astray and ends up in that condition took a path, at some point, in that direction, and it begins by being lax towards sin, and people become lax towards sin because, first of all, they become lax, indifferent in their attitude toward the Word of God. It all begins there. All rebellion begins with unbelief and a disregard of God’s Word.

That’s the reason that Paul is so eager to alert these Corinthians to the dangers they were facing, the danger of sin; the importance of keeping the church pure, adhering to the Word of God and avoiding sin. Sin spreads. It is deadly. We are to take it seriously, and this is how we do it. We do it with discipline. That is to be our concern, the purity of the church, not the immorality of the world. So often today I think that’s what the evangelical church – and I use the word very broadly – that’s really what it’s concerned about.

It wants to make the nation moral. It’s like that’s our big calling in life is to change the moral climate. I hope that the moral climate would change, but I don’t think that’s our

purpose. I think that’s what he’s saying here. I’ll just abbreviate the last two verses, verses 12 and 13, but Paul writes here, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders?” What do I have to do with judging the world, unbelievers? Verse 13, “But those who are outside, God judges”—it’s not for me to do that.

God’s going to do that. I’m to judge, I’m to deal with those inside – that is, the church. That’s to be my concern. God takes care of the world in his way and his time, Paul says; we’re to take care of ourselves. And to make that point with authority and round out his lesson, he concludes with a quote from the Old Testament, “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves,” Deuteronomy 17:7. That is not mean; that’s not heartless. That’s really kind.

It forces the person under discipline to think about his or her sin, to see the seriousness of it, and bring them to repentance. It’s the surest way to bring a wayward person back. So may God give us the wisdom to do that. May God give us the strength to do that – to take the proper action to deal with sin, to recognize the seriousness of it, and to have a zeal for the purity of the church. That’s a zeal that must take place in our own hearts. We must see the need of that in our own personal lives.

And the reality of it is, and I think a proper understanding of all this is, that we can do that only by the grace of God. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that change comes by the Spirit as we study the Word of God. He uses his Word to sanctify us. But we’re dependent upon him for everything, and we can only model him and live that life of obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit. Having said that, I say this: if there is an unbeliever among us, we’re glad you’re here.

If you’re a person who’s never believed in Jesus Christ, this is where you need to be, because we have good news for you. There is salvation in Christ. He is our Passover. He’s our sacrifice. Paul said, “Those who are outside,” that is, those who do not believe, the unbeliever, “God judges.” And he will someday judge the unbeliever. Judgment’s coming. That’s a sobering thought. But Christ took that judgment for all who believe, and you can escape that judgment to come by believing in him.

That’s all one must do; trust in Jesus Christ. May God help you to do that, to believe; the moment you do, you’re forgiven, forever. You’re justified. You’re declared righteous. You’re considered as perfect in God’s sight. He puts the Holy Spirit within you, and he begins to change your life, and empower you to live a life in conformity with that declaration. And we live that until we leave this world and enter into glory unspeakable.

May God help you to come to him, believe in him, and help all of us to live a life that’s circumspect.

A life that’s serious, that takes sin very seriously, and the righteousness of God seriously; may God help us to do that. Let’s close with prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray for that. We ask you to bless us and give us a sense of the urgency of the things that Paul has spoken of here. It’s not an easy text to come to and look at, teach, preach, sit under. It’s not a pleasant text. It wasn’t a pleasant incident in the life of this church. But what Paul had to say to the Corinthians he says to us, and it’s something we need to hear. We need to be reminded of the seriousness of sin, and the urgency of dealing with it.

Help us to do that, and help us to live every day as men and women who are –