



Chapter 2

In the World, but Not of the World

1 Corinthians 5-6

UNDERSTANDING

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read 1 Corinthians 5–6

Chapter 5 and 6 continue St. Paul's emphasis on getting at the root of disunity. Earlier, he went after the topic of wisdom. Now, St. Paul will turn to particular actions of the Corinthians that are leading to their disunity—sexual immorality and taking one another to court.

The Big Picture

The Corinthians' actions are causing disunity within their community.

Sexual Immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1–2)

St. Paul brings an embarrassing situation to the forefront of the conversation: The Corinthians are allowing one of their members to remain in their congregation despite his incestuous relationship with his mother-in-law. St. Paul notes that this immorality is not found even among the pagans (v. 1) and goes on to chide them for their arrogance (v. 2). The irony is thick: The Corinthians are prideful because of their wisdom, yet not even the wisdom of the world finds such an action acceptable!

Excommunication (1 Corinthians 5:3–5)

St. Paul instructs them to expel this member from their congregation. Specifically, they are “to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5). What exactly is St. Paul getting at? The hope is that, by being cut off from the community, the person can realize his error, purify his fleshly desire, and eventually be saved. (2 Corinthians 2:5–11 may be referring to this individual.) This excommunication (literally, out of the community or communion) shows the person the true consequences of his actions. Separation from the Church shows concretely how a serious sin can separate one from God.

The Exodus Background (1 Corinthians 5:6–8)

While St. Paul is concerned with the individual, he sees this kind of immorality as harmful to the entire community. In order to demonstrate this, St. Paul makes an elaborate comparison between the Corinthians and the Israelites—parts of which are obvious, while other pieces remain less clear.

Exodus Background

Most people know that the Exodus was about freeing the Israelites from slavery. Yet their slavery extended far beyond just a physical bondage: The pagan worship of the culture served as a spiritual bondage that prevented the Israelites from truly worshipping and serving the Lord (Ex 3:7–12).

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God called the Israelites out of Egypt so that they could be set apart to be a holy nation (Ex 19:1–6). God instructed each Israelite family to sacrifice a lamb to show this separation. The lamb was considered a god by the ancient Egyptians, and the slaughtering of a lamb was a crime punishable by death. Through this sacrifice, each Israelite family made a statement that they did not believe in Egyptian idolatry and that they were willing to risk their lives for this belief. It was through this sign that the angel of the Lord spared the Israelites from the killing of the first-born sons (Ex 12:21–27). Finally, as a part of this meal, all of the Israelites were supposed to eat unleavened bread and remove all leaven from their homes (Ex 12:14–20).

The Corinthians have a similar problem: They are surrounded by the idolatry and sin of the Corinthian culture (vv. 9–10). Likewise, St. Paul is calling them to separate themselves from this culture. Jesus Christ, in the Eucharistic meal, serves as their Passover lamb, who provides their salvation (v. 7). St. Paul extends the analogy of the leaven to the sin in the community at Corinth: The Corinthian Christians must remove the sin in their midst in order to truly celebrate this festival (v. 8).

Application to Jesus

Jesus is our Passover lamb in the Eucharist, who gives us salvation and sets us apart to be a holy people.

Judging Others (1 Corinthians 5:9–13)

St. Paul follows this analogy with some practical advice on how to approach serious sin inside and outside the Church. Addressing sin

within the Church, St. Paul instructs us not to associate with believers who commit serious sins (v. 11). (For more, see Mt 18:15–18 and 1 Cor 11:29–32.) Comically, St. Paul notes that, if we applied this principle to everyone in the world, we would need to go out of the world in order to carry it out (v. 10)! We are not called to judge those outside of the Church (v. 12).

Lawsuits among Believers (1 Corinthians 6:1–11)

St. Paul moves on to another practice that undermines community: lawsuits. Apparently, believers in Corinth are taking one another to court, which leads to several errors. First, on the surface, fellow believers suing one another does not seem like a constructive way to build unity in the Church—a the very issue St. Paul is addressing. Second, the Corinthians are setting a poor example by taking their disagreements, errors, and disunity in front of unbelievers (v. 1, 6). Third, St. Paul returns to the theme of wisdom: If the Corinthians are so wise, they should be able to settle these matters on their own. This is another case where the Corinthians are trusting in the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom of the Spirit found in their Church.

Finally, St. Paul recognizes that some of the Corinthians may be taking their fellow Christians to court specifically in order to defraud them (v. 7–8). We know that it was a common practice in Corinth for the rich to take advantage of the poor through court cases by bribing the judges or hiring superior lawyers.

While some Corinthians are deceiving others, St. Paul does not want them to be deceived about the consequences (v. 9). These actions will lead a person not to inherit the kingdom of God. Homosexuality is one of those actions listed—one of the few times that the New Testament

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mentions homosexuality directly. (Specifically, the Greek word used here refers to homosexual acts, not just an orientation.) While the sin is severe, St. Paul doesn't point this action out in order to have us shun these people. Following St. Paul's advice earlier, we are called to show them the grace Jesus offers. This can only be truly done through an honest relationship and in love (CCC 2357-59; 1 Cor 5:9-13), not through arguments, attacks, stereotypes, and misunderstanding.

Application to Our Lives

St. Paul challenges us to not judge those outside the Church but asks us to be firm with those inside the Church.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

1 Corinthians 5–6

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to speak up about someone's behavior, but had trouble doing it?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Chapters 5 and 6 continue St. Paul's emphasis on getting at the root of disunity, which he began in chapters 1 and 2. Earlier, he went after the topic of wisdom; now, St. Paul turns to particular actions of the Corinthians that are leading to their disunity—sexual immorality and taking one another to court.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Today's passage is 1 Corinthians 5–6. Start by reading 1 Corinthians 5:1–5.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. What problem does St. Paul address in the beginning of chapter 5?

Answer: A man is living with his father's wife.

2. Given the Corinthians' tendency to rely on the wisdom of the world, what is ironic about this problem?

Answer: The Corinthians tend to trust more in the wisdom of the world than in the Spirit of God, but not even the pagans (with their worldly wisdom) find the man's behavior acceptable.

3. What does St. Paul instruct the Church to do with this man?

Answer: They are "to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5).

4. What do you think it would feel like to address this man about this sin?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. What is the logic behind St. Paul's instructions?

Answer: By being cut off from the community, he can realize his error, purify his fleshly desire, and eventually be saved.

6. Read 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. Some commentators have recognized this person as the one in 1 Corinthians 5:1–5. What is the final result?

Answer: It appears that the man comes back to the Church. St. Paul instructs them to love and forgive him.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6–13.

7. What point is St. Paul making with his analogy in vv. 6–8?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. Read Exodus 12:14–27. Explain the “Exodus Background” in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”

9. How do you think the Corinthians’ situation compares with the one in Exodus?

Answer: They are surrounded by the idolatry and sin of the Corinthians’ culture (vv. 9–10). Likewise, St. Paul is calling them to be separated from this culture. Jesus Christ is the Passover lamb of their salvation (v. 7). Just as they remove the leaven, the Corinthian Christians must remove the sin in their midst in order to truly celebrate this festival (v. 5:8)

10. In what ways are we called to be a holy people separated from the world?

Allow the group to discuss.

11. How are we supposed to approach those inside of the Church who are in serious sin?

Answer: We are not to associate with them.

12. What temptations do we face when there is a problem or sin that needs to be addressed?

Allow the group to discuss.

13. Read Matthew 18:15–18. What does Jesus tell us to do in these situations?

Answer: Address the person yourself. Then, bring others with you. Finally, tell it to the Church.

14. What does St. Paul say about our associations with those outside of the Church?

Answer: We can associate with them, but we are not to judge them.

15. Why is it tempting to stay isolated from the world?

Allow the group to discuss.

16. Practically, how do you think we find a balance being in the world but not of the world?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-11.

17. What are some problems that stem from believers' taking each other to court?

Answer: The errors include disunity, poor example in front of believers (v. 1, 6), and a trust in the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom found in the Spirit.

18. How does this fit into the letter as a whole?

Allow the group to discuss.

19. How is your life different now from a time when Jesus Christ wasn't yet the foundation of your life?

Allow the group to discuss.

