

The Meaning & Application of 1 Corinthians 5

An overview by Tim Hegg

I. In this context, Paul is clearly dealing with someone who continues to be welcomed into the believing community, yet who is actively living in fornication.

v. 1 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.

Ὁλως ἀκούεται ἐν ὑμῖν πορνεία, καὶ τοιαύτη πορνεία ἣτις οὐδὲ ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὥστε γυναῖκά τινά τοῦ πατρὸς ἔχειν.

In the Greek, the English “someone has” translates the present active infinitive ἔχειν (*exein*) which indicates something currently ongoing. The man is actively engaged in fornication.

Moreover, that Paul states that this man is “among you” means that he is still being welcomed into the believing community and accepted as one of the believing community. This is made clear in the next verse.

II. In v. 2, Paul states directly that the man is still being welcomed within the Corinthian community of Yeshua followers, which shows the arrogance of the community, for he should have been dismissed for his refusal to repent of his immoral behavior and lifestyle.

v. 2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

καὶ ὑμεῖς πεφυσιωμένοι ἐστὲ καὶ οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἐπενθήσατε, ἵνα ἀρθῇ ἐκ μέσου ὑμῶν ὁ τὸ ἔργον τοῦτο πράξας;

III. In vv. 3–5, Paul asserts his Apostolic authority, having clear evidence that the man is actively engaged in this kind of immorality, that he was to be dismissed from the congregation, for to allow him to remain would tarnish the very truth of what it means to be a believer, i.e., to repent of sin and to turn from it, seeking to walk in righteousness.

vv. 3–5 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 Yeshua, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Yeshua, 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 Yeshua.

Clearly there is ample evidence as far as Paul is concerned, that this man's lifestyle is fully characterized as that of immorality and fornication. To be with the Corinthians “in spirit” seems most likely to be a way for Paul to express his Apostolic authority even though he is not in Corinth at the present time.

IV. In vv. 6–8, Paul brings in the picture of Pesach and the removal of leaven as a means of illustrating why the man in question must be removed from the community.

vv. 6–8 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 Messiah 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.

Οὐ καλὸν τὸ καύχημα ὑμῶν. οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι μικρὰ ζύμη ὄλον τὸ φύραμα ζυμοῖ; ἐκκαθάρατε τὴν παλαιὰν ζύμην, ἵνα ᾦτε νέον φύραμα, καθὼς ἐστε ἄζυμοι· καὶ γὰρ τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ἐτύθη Χριστός. ὥστε ἐορτάζωμεν μὴ ἐν ζύμῃ παλαιᾷ μηδὲ ἐν ζύμῃ κακίας καὶ πονηρίας ἀλλ' ἐν ἀζύμοις εὐλικρινείας καὶ ἀληθείας.

The charge of boasting which Paul makes, finds its beginning in the previous Chapter. There it appears that the boasting of the Corinthian congregation was that they had arrived to a place of “spiritual maturity,” so much so that they no longer needed to be under the authority of the Apostles.

1Cor 4:6–7 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Having been taught and nurtured by Paul himself, now, in his absence, the community (or perhaps the community leaders) had decided they no longer needed to adhere to the words and writings of the Apostles, but could make their own decisions based upon their own theology. As one commentator comments:

How does their arrogance relate to this despicable sexual transgression? Is the boasting because of the sin or in spite of the sin? Some assume that the Corinthians did not cover up this incestuous relationship with embarrassment but instead took pride in it. They link such bravado to the Corinthians' theological confusion about their freedom, expressed in the slogan "All things are permitted" (6:12). As self-appointed "spiritual ones" they may have imagined that "they could break every canon of decency and yet be without sin." (Garland, in *1 Corinthians of the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT*, p. 160).

V. vv. 9–10 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.

Ἐγραψα ὑμῖν ἐν τῇ ἐπιστολῇ μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι πόρνοις, οὐ πάντως τοῖς πόρνοις τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἢ τοῖς πλεονέκταις καὶ ἄρπαξιν ἢ εἰδωλολάτραις, ἐπεὶ ὠφείλετε ἄρα ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελθεῖν.

Paul had given them previous instructions not to allow anyone whose life was characterized by immorality or other sinful lifestyles to remain within the community as though they were accepted as believers in Yeshua. He did not instruct them to avoid altogether unbelievers, for even Yeshua Himself ate with tax collectors and sinners.

Then it happened that as Yeshua was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Yeshua and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" But when Yeshua heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt 9:10–13)

This highlights Paul's statement in v. 6, that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." To allow someone who is actively living an immoral life to be a regular part of the community is to put at risk those who may be new to the faith, or struggling with their faith, and might therefore cause them to stumble.

VI. v. 11 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.

νῦν δὲ ἔγραψα ὑμῖν μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι ἐάν τις ἀδελφὸς ὀνομαζόμενος ἢ πόρνος ἢ πλεονέκτης ἢ εἰδωλολάτρης ἢ λοιδόρος ἢ μέθυσος ἢ ἄρπαξ, τῷ τοιούτῳ μηδὲ συνεσθίειν.

The Greek word translated "to associate" is *συναναμίγνυμι* (*sunanamignumi*) and is found only three times in the Apostolic Scriptures: in our text (vv. 9, 11) and in 2Thess 3:14, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame."

Here, in our verse, Paul uses the same language as he did in v. 10 (adding "reviler" and "drunkard") to describe someone who professes to be a believer but is publicly known to be an immoral person, covetous, swindler, idolater, etc. This clearly denotes someone whose lifestyle and character is well known by these characteristics.

The final command given by the Apostle is “with such as this not even to eat” (a literal translation of the Greek). Note Hodge’s comments on this phrase:

This does not refer to the Lord’s supper, which is never designated as a meal. The meaning is, that we are not to recognize such a man in any way as a Christian, even by eating with him. It is not the act of eating with such persons that is forbidden. Our Lord ate with publicans and sinners, but he did not thereby recognize them as his followers. So we may eat with such persons as are here described, provided we do not thereby recognize their Christian character. This is not a command to enforce the sentence of excommunication pronounced by the church, by a denial of all social intercourse with the excommunicated. The command is simply that we are not, in any way, to recognize openly wicked men as Christians. (Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1972], p. 91)

VII. vv. 12–13 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.

The final conclusion that Paul makes is a reiteration of what he previously stated, namely, his instruction here (and what he apparently wrote earlier to the Corinthians) is that it pertains to someone who (1) is well known for a lifestyle of immorality etc., and (2) who professes to be a follower of Yeshua and (3) is a welcomed member of the believing community and their local gatherings.

Paul makes it clear that he is not instructing the Corinthians (and us) to cease any association with unbelievers and even with those unbelievers whose lives are characterized by such sinful practices. Rather, the Apostolic injunction is to the gathered body of the Messiah, and the need to set biblical standards of behavior and morality, and not to allow these standards to be diminished by having someone known for such a sinful lifestyle to be welcomed as a member of the community.