

SEXUAL BROKENNESS IN THE CHURCH

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



Catalog No. 20241020
1 Corinthians 5:1-13
Sixth Message
Paul Taylor
October 20, 2024

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Let's start out with a poll. I'd like to see where you all stand on a few topics. These questions are at the core of what our passage this morning addresses. Grab your phones, scan the QR code on the screen, and share your thoughts on these statements.

We're in the middle of a series working through the book of 1 Corinthians. As a reminder, most of this book addresses things that the apostle Paul has heard about what is going on in the city of Corinth and things that they have written to him to ask about. These questions are some of those topics.

Let's see where we stand as a community.

When I was in college at Stanford, I participated in the college ministry of this church. At one point, there was a couple who were dating in the ministry. I was pretty sure they were engaged in a sexual relationship. And I was so judgmental of them. I was angry. I felt better than them. And to be honest, a part of me was jealous. How do we evaluate that situation?

Was their behavior unhealthy? I believe it was. Was my attitude toward them unhealthy? Yes, it was too. Whose behavior was less healthy: theirs for having a sexual relationship outside of marriage, or mine for judging them in such a critical way in my heart? It's a complicated issue.

We live in a culture that is desperately confused about sexuality. Our media portrays a false picture of sex. There is a cultural narrative about what is acceptable that is difficult to counter. And each of us must work through our own desires, hurts, and experiences.

However, within the church, there remains a lot of confusion as well. We struggle with how to interact with our culture. Our behavior—for the most part—mirrors the culture rather than being distinctly different. And sexual abuse—and covering it up—is so common within evangelical churches that it hardly makes the news anymore.

We clearly have a lot to learn. These are complicated questions. But they are exactly the questions that the apostle Paul writes to the young church in Corinth to help them sort through. He tries to help them evaluate their own sexual ethic while teaching them how to relate to the world around them.

This is an important passage for us to hear. There could be no greater issue facing the church today than how to deal with their own sexual ethic and how to interact with the sexual opinions of the world they live in. Both areas have done so much damage to the reputation of Christ. By and large, our church tradition has not brought honor to the name of Jesus in the ways that we have acted sexually and the ways that we have treated the unbelieving world with regards to sexuality.

We need help in this area. This passage can at least point us in the right direction. As we work our way through this passage, we'll see it unfold in four parts. First, we'll hear about the situation in Corinth. Then, we'll hear the response that Paul suggests. After that, we'll consider the reason he provides. We'll close with him, trying to clear up any miscommunication.

The situation—Paul's response—the reason—avoiding any miscommunication.

By the end of this, we should have a little clearer sense of how to think about the sexual ethics of our community and how that relates to the world we live in.

The situation

What would you do if you heard your friend did something shocking? Imagine you saw on Instagram that your friend had embezzled a bunch of money. What would you do?

The apostle Paul heard about his friends in Corinth doing something shocking, so he addresses it in this letter. Here's how he starts.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2a:

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. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?

You can hear the incredulity in his voice. He can't believe that this is happening. The situation being described is that a man is involved in a sexual relationship with his father's wife. That's probably his stepmom. It's not clear whether his father is still alive or whether he has married his stepmom or not. But what is clear says more than enough.

The most surprising thing about this statement is that the behavior Paul describes even violates the sexual ethics of first century Corinth. That is particularly remarkable given what we know of the culture in first century Corinth. One recovered document from the time claimed the following: "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children."¹

As Christians in the 21st century, we can sometimes assume that our culture has no sexual ethics. But that's simply not true. Our culture has no tolerance for sexual violence. We protect children from unwanted sexual advances. We insist that each partner give full consent to anything that happens.

None of those things were true in ancient Rome. So, it's not fair to say that our culture has no sexual ethics. We do, and much of it aligns with values that God would affirm. But there are absolutely areas that don't line up as well. In the next section, we'll talk more about how important it is to arrive at a sexual ethic consistent with the Bible.

For now, let's focus on Paul's challenge to the church of Corinth: "You are arrogant. Ought you rather to mourn!"

Consider the effect this individual's behavior must have had on the young church in Corinth. He chooses to engage in an unhealthy sexual relationship. Everyone knows about it. Everyone approves of it. And everyone in the community has that in the back of their minds as they are making their own choices about how to behave sexually. We can imagine how this situation would lead to widespread brokenness in the Corinthian community.

That's why the apostle suggests that instead of arrogance, the Corinthians ought to mourn. They should recognize and mourn the sexual brokenness of their community.

Is that exhortation relevant today? Is there sexual brokenness within our church community that we ought to mourn? We often like to focus on criticizing the culture around us, but what about us? What could we mourn?

Let's start by allowing ourselves to mourn sexual brokenness.

Could we mourn that pornography use is so prevalent for men and women, even among those who attend church? Many statistics suggest that up to half of men and women in the church watch pornography regularly.² We should deeply mourn that pornography is so available, so destructive, so incredibly addictive and that many people here find themselves trapped by it without knowing how to escape.

Should we mourn that people within the church aren't convinced of the value of reserving sex to the context of marriage? Should we mourn that we haven't talked about sex enough to give each other a biblical vision of the beauty of sex within marriage?

Porn and sex before marriage are often the primary things that the church mourns, but there is a lot more brokenness. Should we mourn whatever systems make it so prevalent for sexual abuse and cover-up to happen with the church? How is it that Bill Hybels, Ravi Zacharias, Robert Morris – the president of the SBC, Carl Lentz, Brian Houston, Mike Bickle, and more had years of popular ministry before anyone found out what was really going on? Should we mourn that?

Should we mourn the guilt and shame that sexual assault victims often feel? Should we mourn husbands and wives who don't know how to love each other well? Should we mourn gender confusion and the difficulty that we have guiding people through that? Should we mourn how the church can often ostracize singles in its attention to family ministry?

Yes, yes, yes, and yes. There is so much to mourn. So much hurt and pain and confusion. Anything redemptive starts with Paul's simple suggestion: Ought you rather to mourn?

It's one of those God things that we happened to have this passage scheduled for the week we are announcing a seminar on sexual brokenness. We live in a broken world, and many of us have experienced its effects in the area of sexuality. If that's you, please consider joining this group to start a path toward healing.

That's where Paul starts for the Corinthians.

The response

In response to this situation, Paul suggests that the young church take decisive action. It's a little hard to understand for us, but I think we'll find that it makes more sense than we realize. Let's see what he says.

1 Corinthians 5:2b-5:

Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ 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. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the LORD Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our LORD Jesus, ⁵ 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.

Paul instructs the church to remove the sexual offender from their midst. He speaks strongly because the presence of this individual endangers the entire community. At first, that might sound harsh, but it is not so different from what we do. For people who have committed egregious sexual crimes in our culture, we require them to register with the government. They are restricted from participating in certain activities.

We understand the idea that certain sexual behavior can be dangerous to a community.

What is interesting about the approach Paul takes is that there is hope for redemption built in. Verse five is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to translate. There are several options, but the possessive pronoun "his" is not in the text. The best reading, in my opinion, is that the Corinthians are meant to deliver this man to the forces of their culture—that's Satan's realm—"for the destruction of the flesh so that the Spirit may be saved." The goal is that sin be purged from within him, and he may live by the Spirit. That's redemption.

Behind the command to remove this person for redemptive purposes is a general principle to hold in high regard the sexual ethic that God teaches. We must take our sexual behavior seriously. This is the only issue in the book of 1 Corinthians, where Paul suggests removing the offender from the community.

One of the most dangerous lies of our culture is that what happens between two consenting adults does not affect the community. It's a radical extension of Western individualism to suggest that sexual choices are only relevant to the people making those choices. Most other cultures know that the way we behave sexually affects everyone in the community.

The Bible is absolutely clear that following Jesus involves a whole-life commitment. To fully experience the kind of relationship God wants you to have with Christ, God wants all of you: your prayer life, your family life, your social life, your professional life, and your sex life.

God's purpose is not to restrict us. The sexual ethic of the Bible is a gift, meant to guide us toward health in all areas of life. We do not need to be ashamed, apologetic, or timid about encouraging followers of Jesus to shape their sexual lives in accordance with the ethics of the Bible. There is no better way to live as a fully formed human being.

The second idea we can learn is to celebrate a biblical sexual ethic.

I worry that many of us are afraid to talk openly about a biblical sexual ethic. Parts of it stand in such contrast to the culture around us that we are embarrassed by it. The people we live among might think it's backward and old-fashioned or even dangerous. But we cannot let that thinking creep its way into the church.

The Psalmists speak over and over again about the life-giving potential of God's ethics. I'll admit that when I was younger, I struggled to see how containing my sexual desires could possibly be a good thing. But having lived some more life, I can say that I see the beauty of God's design for sex. We have nothing to be embarrassed by: God gives incredible sexual wisdom in the Scriptures.

But we must also acknowledge that so many of us have failed in various ways. I would go so far as to say that every single one of us has failed. None of us are pure. Sexual brokenness is all around us. We can take comfort

in the hope for transformation that we see in this passage. The flesh can be destroyed. Our sinful tendencies can be healed in Christ.

There is always hope for transformation. You can always hope for transformation. We believe that God heals, cures, redeems, and saves. It doesn't matter whether you have made mistakes, been the victim of sexual assault, or are confused or anything else. God works in our lives to make us whole.

I've shared before about my own struggles with pornography addiction in my teens and twenties. I felt trapped and, ashamed and broken. But I have seen God redeem that part of my life—not instantly but over time. Redemption is real.

In our culture, it is a radical idea that our sex lives have anything to do with each other. But that's part of what our culture gets wrong. Sexual behavior doesn't just affect two people. We live in a community. It affects all of us. What one person decides influences another.

That's the idea that Paul tries to establish next. We need to take sex seriously as a community because of how it affects each of us.

The reason

Having encouraged them to mourn sexual brokenness and then take a biblical ethic seriously, the apostle Paul gives them the reasoning behind his command. We've seen him use the imagery of leaven before in 1 Corinthians. Now he goes back to it.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?
⁷ 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.
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.

Notice how the issue of arrogance comes up again. It's the second time that Paul has criticized their boasting. His main concern in this whole passage is how the believing community responds to the sexual brokenness in its midst. We'll talk in our last point about how to

engage the world around us. But his instruction to the church is clear: focus on your own brokenness.

If we don't pay attention to what we allow to exist within our midst, the leaven spreads. Yeast grows. Sin expands. Behavior becomes normalized. This is the challenge that every generation faces. The difficult truth to face is that we tend to let things happen in our midst without addressing them. Every community has a bias toward sympathy for insiders. Particularly its leaders.

Paul's instructions are to be focused on accountability within the community.

The title of this series is "Under the Cross" because the apostle repeatedly goes back to the cross of Christ to anchor his point. That's what he does there. Christ has been sacrificed. The leaven has been removed. We are free to celebrate a new festival because we have been made new.

We have the freedom to hold each other accountable because we know that redemption is available. We are not out to punish or shame or guilt people. Our goal is to create a healthy community that brings honor to God and offers everyone a path of redemption and healing.

Why is there so much sexual abuse within the church? Are there ways that we turn a blind eye to it? Do we give enough voice to victims? We tend to pick certain issues to pay attention to. But others are more difficult to address.

This passage is about making sure that we as a community are diligent about dealing with the sexual brokenness among us. It is about making sure that we are being honest with each other, supporting each other, facing our own brokenness in light of the cross of Jesus, and trusting in his transformation of us. Who is this passage for? It is for all of us—all of us who believe in Jesus.

Dealing with the sexual brokenness of the world starts with us.

This is Paul's insistent point. But he knows what people are like. And he knows that if he tells a group of people that they should address sexual brokenness, they are far more likely to start with the people out there than the people in here. So his final point is to cut off that temptation.

Embracing outsiders

The apostle's focus throughout this passage has been on sexual brokenness within the church. In the last few verses, he makes it abundantly clear that there is a difference between how we treat insiders and outsiders.

1 Corinthians 5:9-12:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not 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?

Everything he has said refers to people within the church—the community of faith who have already put their faith in Jesus. To emphasize his point, he expands the list of issues beyond sexuality. He's broadening the idea to the general way that we treat insiders and outsiders.

It comes down to this. In any community, we typically sympathize with insiders and focus on accountability toward outsiders. Paul says we have that backwards. Our posture should be to keep each other accountable within the community but embrace those outside the community. Accountability within; sympathy toward outsiders.

Why have we had such a hard time learning this? There are a lot of things in the Bible that are hard to understand. This is not one of them. Those who follow Jesus are not supposed to apply their sexual ethic to the world. They are meant to focus on living out their own sexual ethic. Paul's point here is that if you believe in Jesus you have been changed. But if you have not believed, that isn't true of you.

For those who don't know Jesus, it is not our job to judge them. Imagine if Christians over the course of history had been able to live by just that one simple and very clear rule. How different would our reputation be? How much stronger would our witness be?

Our posture toward those who don't know Jesus is one of embrace. Embrace those outside.

The apostle mocks the idea that we are to separate ourselves from sinful people in the world. It's a crazy thought because that would mean that Christians would need to go out of the world. Little did he know how many people would do just that—either judge the world or try to escape from it.

Paul insists that this is not the way of those who follow Jesus. What have I to do with judging outsiders?

In a 2007 study of young adults, nearly 90 percent said that Christians are judgmental.³ How have we gotten this so wrong? We talk so much about how to interpret certain verses and spend plenty of time debating about the things that are unclear in Scripture, but we can't even apply the most basic and clear commands that we find.

Think back over your conversations or interactions. What do you have to repent of? How have you been judgmental toward outsiders and sympathetic toward insiders?

God, help us. Give us the discernment to recognize this and the courage to repent.

Conclusion

Sexual brokenness is everywhere. It's rampant in our culture. It fills our churches. It's buried within each of our hearts.

But there is another way. When we come back to the cross of Christ, we can be transformed. Because of who God is and what Christ has done, we have the possibility to be a different kind of community. We can have the courage to mourn the sexual brokenness in our midst—all of it. We can hold to a biblical sexual ethic with confidence and hope for healing. We can keep each other accountable even when it is painful and difficult. And we can embrace outsiders without judgment for adhering to a sexual ethic that they don't even hold.

This is the grand vision that the apostle Paul lays out for the church in Corinth and it's just as relevant today as it was then. The only way this happens is through the power of Christ among us. Because of his love and redemption, we can face our own brokenness and be confident that there is redemption on the other side of it.

Endnotes

1. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 215.
2. “The Porn Phenomenon,” Barna, October 2024, <https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/>.
3. Jason Malec, “Why are Christians so Judgmental?” Explore God, October 2024, <https://www.explorethegod.com/articles/why-are-christians-so-judgmental>.