

“Disgrace” 1 Corinthians 5

Hymns: #42 Holy, Holy, Holy #443 Just As I Am

Reading: 1 Corinthians 5

Oscar Wilde was an Irish poet and playwright who became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. Known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress and glittering conversational skill, Wilde became one of the best-known personalities of his day. He is best remembered for his epigrams, plays, and his novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray”. As one of the leaders of the Decadence Movement of his era Oscar Wilde, once said, "I can resist anything except temptation!" and he is remembered for his saying: "The best way to deal with temptation is to yield to it!"

He is also sadly remembered for the circumstances of his imprisonment and early death. At the height of his career, Wilde had the Marquess of Queensberry prosecuted for criminal libel. The Marquess also happened to be the father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. However, the libel trial unearthed evidence that led to his own arrest and trial for gross indecency with men. Wilde was convicted and sentenced to two years' hard labour, the maximum penalty, and was jailed from 1895 to 1897. He died destitute in Paris at the age of 46. Before his death, Wilde made this self-assessment:

“The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease...Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.”

The degeneracy and ultimate disgrace of Oscar Wilde’s life serves as a vivid illustration of the disgrace that the Corinthian church had fallen into and the disgrace that the Apostle Paul, as their spiritual father, must condemn and correct. Having dealt with the divisions within the church in chapters 1-4, Paul now deals with the inevitable fruit of those divisions as expressed in the report he has received of there being cases of incest, lawsuits and sexual immorality among them. These things are utterly disgraceful and will not fly on Paul’s watch. In what is arguably one of the most disciplinary chapters of the NT, God the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul is not going to allow His people to end in the horrible disgrace of Oscar Wilde, but is going to deal very firmly with their disgrace. In chapter 5 we will see 1. Disgrace Delivered to Complete Destruction (V. 1-5), 2. Disgrace Discarded to Cleanse the Dough (V. 6-8) and finally 3. Disgrace Disassociated with Clarified Decision (V.9-13)

1. Disgrace Delivered to Complete Destruction (V. 1-5) *“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. 2And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. 4When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.*

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This is surely one of the most disgraceful episodes recorded of the early life of the church. And the fact that it is recorded should convince any unbiased reader that the Bible must be inspired by God, for no man would write of such a thing and then point it out if he was trying to promote a man-made work as if it was divinely authored. But God’s word is unafraid of showing fallen men, even God’s servants, with warts and all. As hard as it is to believe, the fact is, there was a Christian man in the church at Corinth who was carrying on an incestuous affair with his step mother. This was not just gossip, hearsay or a rumor that was being circulated. It was common knowledge. Not only did the church tolerate this; not only did they condone it by doing nothing about it; not only were they compromising with evil...they were actually “proud” of it!

This kind of sin was prohibited not only in the OT in Lev. 18:8 “Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father” but it was even prohibited in Roman Law as evidenced by the writings of Cicero in *Cluentis* 6.15 and by Gaius in *Instituta* 1.63.¹ Even pagan Rome did not allow what the Corinthian church was celebrating! I wish I didn’t have to make the very current and obvious application to what is happening across much of Christendom. An equally disgraceful and biblically prohibited homosexuality is being celebrated within many churches today. Some who name Jesus’s name are actually “proud” of this just like the Corinthians were of the incestuous relationship that was going on amongst them. Yes, the laws of man have changed so that today even the laws of ancient pagan Rome seem conservative by comparison. But folks, neither the Law of God nor God himself has changed. God called it sin then and He calls it sin today. Mal. 3:6 “I the Lord do not change”; Heb. 13:8 “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever”.

Paul says rather than being proud, they should have done two things. First, they should have been filled with grief, literally mourned. The same word used to mourn over the dead.² Hold on to that thought. Second, they should have put this man out of their fellowship. To put someone out of fellowship is a very serious authority and responsibility conferred on the church by Jesus Christ Himself. This point is driven home when we recall that the first two references to the church in the Gospel of Matthew, even before the church came into existence, were in the context of Jesus conferring authority and responsibility on the church to exercise church discipline.

Matt. 16:17-19 “Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my church**, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Matt. 18:15-20 ““If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to **the church**; and if he refuses to listen even to **the church**, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

The Body of Christ has been given responsibility and authority to bind and loose; to treat as a pagan or tax collector; and to forgive or not forgive someone’s sins as Jesus conferred in John 20:23.

¹ David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.514)*

² Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians; Victor Books; 1983; p. 65*

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Obviously this is not referring to God’s “eternal forgiveness” of sins which is based solely on the shed blood of Jesus and one’s faith in Him (Eph. 1:7). Rather, this is referring to “relational or borrowed forgiveness”, conferred by the church according to the Spirit. In other words, the Spirit filled Church will have the resident authority to say what behaviour is sinful and what is not; what constitutes a penitent posture to receive that relational forgiveness and what does not. It also means that it has the privilege to announce God’s terms of forgiveness through belief in Christ and to announce a person’s forgiveness if they believe. Equally the Spirit filled church is privileged and authorized to announce a person is not forgiven if they don’t believe. Notice I said the spirit filled church will have the “resident authority” to act, meaning to act in the Name of Jesus Himself, because He himself is there where even two or three are gathered, not simply in some inherent authority of the local church.

Just how serious is this responsibility and authority? Notice first that Paul says he has already “passed judgement” on this incestuous sinning man. But wait a minute...didn’t Paul say in the last chapter to judge nothing before the appointed time (4:5)? Indeed he did, but there he was calling the Corinthians to refrain from a premature judging of what they perceived to be good; namely the men they were boasting about. Here, he is demonstrating by example that they need to refrain from lagging behind in judging that which is clearly evil and unrepentant conduct. Paul has passed judgement and condemned this act and then calls on the Corinthians to “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” Wow! “Hand this man (notice, not the woman, who would appear to not be a believer and therefore none of Paul’s business as we will see shortly) over to Satan, so that the sarx- flesh- meaning his physical body in this context, may be destroyed, that means death, and his spirit saved on the day of Christ, which surprisingly indicates Paul assumed this man to be a believer.

Dallas Theological Seminary professor David Lowery says here “So it seems probable that Paul intended this man should be excluded from the fellowship of the congregation, thus physically expressing his exclusion from God’s protection which he formally enjoyed (cf Job.1:12) and thrusting him out into the arena of the world (1 John 5:19) where Satan would bring about his death. It thus became a painful example of the price of self-centred indifference and a powerful reminder of the demand for holiness in God’s temple (1 Cor. 3:17; 6:19)”³

Does that surprise you? Shock you? To the degree that it does, then to that degree you have failed to fully appreciate the value God places on the purity of life of those who compose His temple-building- body. And note this is not an isolated text. Remember what happened to Uzzah when he reached out his hand and touched the Ark of the Covenant when the oxen stumbled and the cart was about to tip out the ark? God took his life. Remember what happened to Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to the Holy Spirit and tried to deceive the church with their supposed generosity in giving? They were both struck dead. Remember what happened to those at Corinth who partook of the Sacrament of Bread and Wine in an unworthy matter? Many became weak, sick and some had even fallen asleep (died). Remember what John said in 1 John 5: 16-17 “16If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. **There is a sin that leads to death.** I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.” Remember what James said in 5:19-20 “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will **save him from death** and cover over a multitude of sins. Finally, remember what Paul said he did with

³ David K. Lowry; 1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.514)

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Hymenaeus and Alexander when they had rejected faith and a good conscience and thus shipwrecked their faith? He handed them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20), the very same thing he presumably did when he passed judgment on the man this chapter and the very thing he is calling the Corinthians to do.

Let me ask you a question? If God does not change and if Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever...what does that tell us about this biblical exhortation to exercise church discipline when faced with the clear flaunting of God’s word within the church? Obviously, it is still both a conferred authority and a sober responsibility. Paul instructed the Corinthians that flagrant unrepentant disgrace is to be delivered to complete destruction.

I realize some think this instruction was isolated to the time of the early Church when God was establishing an authoritative precedent of holiness within the newly born Church. I realize others think this instruction was purely an apostolic prerogative and as such was only ever intended for the Corinthian church specifically. I realize that there are still others who believe handing a flagrantly sinful and unrepentant believer over to the devil is still in play today for every church. Personally, I have never been faced with such or similar situation and I hope I never am. But if I was, I believe that it would only be done by the decision of a Spirit filled and Spirit directed leadership within a Spirit filled and Spirit directed assembly of believers...and both those are hard to come by these days. Nevertheless, I think we can all agree that this kind of disgrace calls for strong and decisive action by the assembly rather than brushing it under the rug, or worse still being proud of it.

Two final observations about the man involved in this sin. Paul was adamant about protecting the integrity of the church and so handing this man over to Satan and death was not beyond the pale for him. But equally, Paul was confident that if he was a true believer the man’s spirit would be saved on the day of Christ. Lastly, “in the past, many writers identified (the man in 2 Cor. 2:5) him with the incestuous man whom Paul had judged (1 Cor. 5). Relatively few now hold this view because of the severity of that judgement when compared with (the situation in 2 Cor. 5), and the unlikelihood that 1 Corinthians is the letter, referred to in 2 Cor.2:3-4.”⁴

2. Disgrace Discarded to Cleanse the Dough (V. 6-8) *“6Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 7Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.”*

Paul pulls up the Corinthians for their pride and boasting over the sin in their midst and in a diplomatic fashion says to them, “You guys have no idea about the fact that a little of this kind of sin will work through all of you, if you don’t clean it out, just like leaven will work through a whole batch of dough.”

We recall that when God was about to deliver the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery He gave Moses instructions about the Passover. They were to place the blood of the Passover Lamb on the doorposts of their home and, among other things, they were to eat bread without yeast in it...that is unleavened bread. Exodus 12:14; 19; tells us the Passover Feast was to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come and that on the first day of the week long feast, the Israelites were to remove all the yeast from their houses and 13:7 “...nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen within your boarders”.

⁴ David K. Lowry; 2 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.538)

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This is the image Paul has in mind as David Lowry summarizes saying “As the literal yeast was removed from the house during the “Festival of Unleavened Bread”, so that which it illustrated, sin, was to be removed from the house of God, the local church, during its “Festival of Unleavened Bread”, a continual observance for a Christian who has found in Christ’s death on the cross the once-for-all sacrifice of the Passover Lamb (cf. John 12:29; Heb. 10:10,14).⁵

Whilst yeast or leaven is normally a symbol of evil or corrupt doctrine, religious externalism, scriptural scepticism or worldly political alliances as in Matt. 13:33; 16:6, here it is a symbol of an individual who’s flagrant and unrepentant disobedience is in danger of having a deleterious effect on the rest of the assembly. To the Jewish mind, the image of yeast made a lot more sense than it does to most of. Perhaps we gentiles might catch more of the meaning if we were to use the image of a “bad apple”. If you put a bad apple in a barrel of good apples, the good apples will never make the rotten apple good. Rather, just the opposite happens. The good apples in contact with the bad apple are the first to become rotten and decay. And if you leave them in there long enough the entire barrel of apples will turn into a rotten mess of compost.

Or perhaps the saying “A pig in the parlour doesn’t change the pig, but it sure changes the parlour” makes sense.

Or maybe the image of cancer makes more sense to us. If someone has a malignant cancer, an operation is usually performed to cut it out. If this is not done it will metastasize and spread. So to save the health of the rest of the body, a surgeon is required, and what relief it is to hear his words “We got it all”. “This same thing should be true in the church. The reason to excommunicate the one refusing to be disciplined is to protect the rest of the body from being infected with that disease. Sin, like cancer, needs to be cut out so it will not spread.”⁶

The biblical mandate to us is just as clear as it was to the Corinthians. Disgrace must be cleansed from the dough in order that we might protect the health and wellbeing of the those who are faithfully seeking to have their behaviour conformed to their true being...in other words, to become a “new batch” as they truly are.

But Paul is quick to point out that while some unquestionable, flagrant and unrepentant sin may require the drastic measure of handing over to Satan, other sins require a different response and also is dependent on whether the offender is a Christian or not.

3. Disgrace Disassociated with Clarified Decision (V.9-13) *“I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- 10not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. 12What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”*

We recall that 1 Corinthians is not actually the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians, but the second (See Ch. 1 notes). V. 9 literally says “I wrote (past tense- prior to this letter) to you THE (definite article) letter.” In that letter Paul advised that the Corinthians were not to associate with immoral, greedy, swindling, idolaters. But they misunderstood THE letter and thought they were to

⁵ David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.514)*

⁶ Michael P. Green; *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching; Baker Books; 1982; p. 61*

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apply this to people in the world, unbelievers. But Paul says in v. 11 literally, “But actually I wrote (past tense)... (NASB), meaning “What I meant was you are to not to associate with anyone who is designated as a brother...anyone who names the name of Christ or is called a Christian, but is “sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.”

Paul now clarifies his meaning and corrects their misunderstanding and calls on them to make a clear decision to disassociate, not from the world’s people but from those designated as Christians whose lives they judge to be sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.” With such a one they were not to even eat. Paul emphatically asserts that neither he, nor the Corinthians, nor we here has any business in judging the world and its unbelieving mass. That’s not our job. God alone will do that. Our responsibility lies in judging, that is making a moral distinction, within the assembly of believers. This does not mean we turn into a cohort of critical Mrs. Flushpools like in the Sacred Diary of Adrien Plass, but neither do we ignore the internal signs of sickness in the body and just sweep things under the carpet. In the early church, to no longer associate with someone to the point where you would not even eat with them, had some sting in it. Now days, we live such disconnected and dis-integrated lives within most churches that if you judged someone to be a greedy business swindler while naming Christ or a sexually immoral person wearing the name Christian and you were forced to no longer associate or eat with them, it would make little or no difference. You don’t associate or eat with them now. It is a sad indictment of the nature of most assemblies that we no longer have enough true relational connection to discern the body or apply the clear instructions of scripture.

Nevertheless where these sinful habits are discerned we have a responsibility. First, according to Matt. 18 which we read earlier, we are to make personal progress through the stages of addressing it. If that is unsuccessful then we are to no longer associate with them...we are to withdraw. And note that this withdraw, unlike handing over to Satan, is not primarily a punitive act but a restorative one. Paul echoes this meaning in 2 Thes. 3:14-15 where he said “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” The point of their feeling ashamed is that they might come to their senses and repent.

One final, yet important aspect of the disassociation that Paul instructs us with here, is that there is a vast difference between the church becoming “isolationists” and “being separate”. The former is actually impossible, as Paul made clear in v. 10, “you would actually have to leave the world” to apply this judgement to the world. However, we are to be separate, that is, to be “in the world, but not of the world”. Paul spells this out in 2 Cor. 6:14 “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. 17 **Therefore come out from them and be separate**, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. 18 I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”

This chapter closes with a well-known and frequently repeated verse that every Jewish ear would have immediately related to. “Expel the wicked man from among you.” Paul’s dealing with flagrant unrepentant sinners and handing them over to Satan; the need to cleanse the assembly of evil; and to no longer associate with sinning believers who are trashing the Name of Christ...none of this was new to them. You see, “Expel the wicked man from among you” is referenced in Deuteronomy and repeated a full seven times (Deut. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,24; 24:7). God made it clear that

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anyone guilty of being a false prophet, who worshiped other gods, bore false witness, was a disobedient profligate son, a promiscuous fornicator or participated in human trafficking...all of them were to be purged from among the assembly...and the purging method was death.

This chapter is a very sobering wakeup call to the complacency which has become commonplace today. Like the Corinthians, far too many believers today have become so used to living with Disgrace, that it takes a sobering shot across the bow to remind us of the dangers of becoming shipwrecked in our faith like Hymenaeus and Alexander.

If we are not serious about the value of holiness and purity in our individual and corporate life as Christians, then we are sadly headed to the same ending as Oscar Wilde who pathetically said “I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.”

May we all obediently trust in our Savior Jesus Christ and thus joined to Him, see every disgrace replaced with His grace. Let's pray...