

Sermon 16: 1 Corinthians 5:6-8: An Unleavened Lump

OUTLINE

The danger of leaven
Cleansing the old leaven
Keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread

INTRODUCTION

The church has a balancing act to follow as it seeks to be welcoming to sinners but not to sin. The church is to be gentle with sinners but hard on sin. The church is a hospital where those who are full of wounds caused by sin can come and find healing; but it is also a surgery where radical amputations of sin infected parts are cut off. It has to communicate a message that says all are welcome, anyone can come; but it also has to preach the sinfulness of sin, how God is holy and it will be judged, and must be repented of. If we are all soft we will fall into the error of antinomianism; if we are all hard we will fall into the trap of legalism. All sinners are welcome if they will part with their sin, and if they will not part with their sin then they will be put out with it, this is the role of church discipline. Last week we began looking at the idea of church discipline. Think of that as the how to sermon that outlines the procedure for how it ought to be done. Today we are focusing on the why question, why sin has to be addressed, why church discipline must be done in the life of the local church.

Paul in 1 Cor. 5:6-8 uses a number of metaphors linked with leaven to communicate the importance of dealing with sin. We have three points to guide us through this section, firstly, we want to consider the danger of leaven as a metaphor for sin; secondly, cleansing out the old leaven as a metaphor for church discipline and holiness; and thirdly, how Paul draws on the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened bread to motivate the life of holiness that should follow salvation.

The danger of leaven

V6, 'Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?' Paul we have said is addressing the pride of the Corinthians which has resulted in them having a false assessment of their own spiritual health. They have a surplus of gifts in teaching ministries, miracles and theological nuance, but they are loveless and they are tolerant of sin. Here Paul helps us to see that a true test of our maturity is not in ability to speak publicly, nor in our theological sophistication, nor in the presence of miracles working in our lives but whether our lives are full of love and holiness, this is a true test of our spiritual health. The mind that is spiritually healthy is the one that is able to see sin in all its forms. We can be full of good theology and not be able to recognize the sin in our own lives and how it has crept into our walk, nor the sin in our church, where the church and the world do not differ in their opinions and practices. The heart that is healthy has a horror of sin, is not blasé but concerned. In the world it is a sign of sophistication to not be disturbed by all manner of sins, it is the opposite in the church. The Corinthians were boasting, they had a high opinion of themselves, they looked down their noses and judged others as ignorant and superstitious, but their boasting is not good because they have allowed sin into the church and Paul will now alert them to the danger.

Paul uses leaven as a picture of sin. Leaven is not an evil thing in itself, and the bible uses it both positively and negatively. Positively Jesus uses leaven as a picture of the kingdom of God, Matt. 13:33, 'He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." The hidden invisible working of the Spirit will result in the gospel going out to all nations. But more often leaven is used to describe sin. In Luke 12:1 He says, "'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.'" In Galatians 5:9 Paul warns the Galatians that false teaching is like leaven that can have an impact on the whole lump. In the OT leaven was not to be used in the various grain offerings, Lev, 2:11, "'No grain offering that you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as a food offering to the Lord.'" One commentator writes, 'Leaven, to be distinguished from yeast, was made by keeping back a piece of the previous week's dough, storing it in suitable conditions, and adding juices to promote the process of fermentation, much like sourdough (Mitton 1972-73). This moldy dough could go bad and become a contaminant, which explains why it was a fitting symbol for the infectious power of evil.'¹ Paul chooses the metaphor of leaven because of its invisible nature working in dark and secret places; it starts off small and grows and multiplies until it leavens the whole lump; and if the leaven is bad it will infect the whole lump which will have to eventually be thrown away and one has to begin from scratch. Paul is using leaven to make us think more deeply about the nature of sin.

How serious is a little sin? In a church a little racism can cause terrible divisions as we see in Acts 6 where the Greek widows were being overlooked in the distribution due to language barriers, the whole office of deacon was implemented to tackle this oversight. A little hypocrisy in Peter who separated himself from the Gentile believers in Galatia in order to eat with those Judaizers who had come from Jerusalem who believed that even Gentile believers were still unclean and could not eat with them. Paul had to publicly rebuke Peter for this one little action of where he sat to eat lunch. James tells us that the tongue sets on fire the course of nature. How much damage can one lie to someone's reputation? Here we have the problem of gross sexual immorality being tolerated in the church. How will the children be impacted by the church's relaxed attitude about these things? How will those who are struggling with past patterns of sexual addiction be impacted by this matter? What topics that should be preached on will not be brought up because they would put certain people in the spotlight? What about any people who have been invited to church to hear the gospel who have been victims of adultery? What about the unbeliever who is seeking for the truth and sees that the church of Jesus Christ is not a picture of humanity as it ought to be, but merely another club with a message that makes no difference to people's lives?

Sin acts in the same way in our lives personally. If a sinful arises in our hearts bubbling up out of the flesh that is still with us as believers and we do not call it sin, if we do not immediately stop it in its tracks, confess it to God, and seek to cultivate a heart that loves holiness and hates sin. That small desire allowed, becomes a sinful imagination; a sinful imagination grips the heart and will and weakens us to sin; that imagination if not put to death will give birth to action, and we sin not only inwardly but outwardly. If that outward sin is tolerated it becomes a habit; a habit lived in becomes an addiction; then a character, and in

1 David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 178.

today's terms people will feel themselves defined by that sin and they might even identify by it. A small sin allowed can steal your peace with God; making an opening for the devil; quench the Holy Spirit which will impact every other area in your life like prayer, enjoying your bible, being with the people of God, worshipping, etc. We put sin to death in ourselves so that it does not grow; church discipline is a communal version of that.

Cleansing the old leaven

V7, '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.' Here is our second leaven picture, Paul wants the Corinthians to address the matter of sin in their house, as any Israelite would do when they were celebrating the Passover. You will remember that the Passover comes first and directly following a week of celebrating the feast of Unleavened Bread. One commentator writes, 'The command to cleanse out (ἐκκαθάρατε, *ekkatharate*) the old leaven assumes that the readers are familiar with the Jewish rituals associated with Passover. Only unleavened bread was to be eaten during Passover, and every crumb of leavened bread was removed in a ceremonial search of the dwelling on the morning when the Passover lambs were sacrificed. No leavened bread was to be found in the people's possession (Exod. 13:7; Deut. 16:4), and eating leaven during the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread incurred the severest penalty of being cut off from Israel (Exod. 12:15, 19).'² Leaven was often thought to represent those four hundred years in Egypt where Israel had slowly adopted Egyptian ways and become like the Egyptians in many things. God as part of saving them, got them to purge all the old leaven, anything associated with their life in Egypt, to put it behind them and commit themselves to a new way of being God's people.

What we must not miss is the fact that Paul says we should cleanse out the old leaven, because we are unleavened. This sounds like a contradiction at first but is in fact a wonderful gospel truth. So are we still leavened and have to cleanse it out, or are we unleavened, and the answer is, Yes! Paul is of course referring to the double truths that are true of us. We are saints in Christ but we are also being sanctified. We have died with Christ so that the power of sin over us is broken, but the presence of sin still remains. We are no longer dead in sin, but we are still putting sin to death within us. The work of progressive sanctification does not happen in a moment like some second blessing forms of teaching suggest, we believe that sanctification has two aspects. There is the moment we are positionally sanctified when we get saved. This moment of regeneration and being filled with the Spirit is the moment our being dead to sin ended, we came alive. But we are not yet glorified and so we still wrestle with the old passions of the flesh. If you are a Christian you know this battle zone Gal. 5:17, 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.'

Paul encourages the Corinthians to be holy because they are holy; to be progressively sanctified and put sin away, because they have died with Christ and are positionally sanctified. Paul is rooting the imperative of ongoing holiness in the indicative of their already being saints through union with Christ. This is

2 David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 179.

such an important pastoral strategy. Think on this. Every single one of you came in here today feeling defeated by sin in some way, perhaps as a result of this you are discouraged, some might believe they can't beat a particular sin, some may have even given up and stopped fighting, some may be so far gone that after not fighting, the sin feels normal and it does not even register as a sin anymore because the hardness of sin has set in. Paul has some good news for you, you can kill sin; you can make progress in holiness; you are able to cleanse out the old leaven and leave those besetting sins of your old life behind. He does not teach this based on a false view of perfectionism which says there is no longer any sinful nature in us. No, his call to cleanse the old leaven recognizes some residue of sin still left behind. No, he recognizes that God has done something in us when He united us with Christ. Paul puts it this way in Rom. 6:6, 'We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.' The body of sin that Paul is describing here is your body in Adam, when unregenerate and subject to Satan as Paul describes in Eph. 2:1-3, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' But that is not you anymore. Yes you still have a body of death that you carry around that is an endless fountain of temptations, but you are able to say no, you also have new desires by the Spirit arising within in warring against those old ways. By virtue of the new birth you can even begin to put those sins to death and carve out new patterns of behavior, a new character, the fruits of the Spirit in the place of sin. Yes the growth is slow, Yes it will feel like you are unchanged because you still have roaring desires in your heart. But with time, in dependence upon God, with the due use of the means of the Spirit like reading your bibles, praying, going to church, confessing your sins to one another, you can move forward. Not unto perfection but definitely forward. You walked in here today feeling defeated, put the truth of the gospel to the pessimism that so often dogs us in our fight against sin as Paul is doing with the Corinthians.

Paul offers a second incentive to put away sin, 'For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.' Once again Paul is drawing pictures in our minds taking us back to the book of Exodus. You will remember that the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt. God raised up Moses to deliver them, and through the 10 plagues God forced Pharaoh to let His people go. The 10th plague consisted of the death of the firstborn. But God made provision for His people. They were to take a male unblemished lamb, and without breaking any of its bones take its blood and place the blood on the doorposts. When the Angel of Death came through Egypt, the angel would see the blood and Passover that household and no one would die in that house. This was the straw that broke the camel's back, after this Pharaoh drove Israel out, this is what ended their slavery and set them free. What then is Paul saying here. Paul is saying this: look at that Lamb, that is no ordinary lamb, that is God who has come down in the flesh to be a sacrifice for us, as John the Baptist announced, the Lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world. Think on the quality of His person, think on the superiority of His sacrifice. Paul uses the language of sacrifice here to show what Jesus did for us when He died. Paul tells us that God gave Jesus to be a propitiation in His blood that whoever believes in Him can be saved. the blood of Jesus Christ was given as a sacrifice, as a substitute, the wages of sin is death. He poured out His blood to pay for our sin debt. That blood covers us, and God's judgement passes

over any who take refuge in Christ. Any who come to Christ saying, I am a sinner, unless you save me I will die, you have died to save sinners, please save me. God will take Christ's death for yours, just like the angel of death saw the blood of the Passover lamb as indicating that a death had already happened, and God will not judge you with the death that you deserve. But more than that, Paul is saying: we have not merely been delivered by a typological deliverance from a political power like Pharaoh. No, we have been rescued from our greatest enemies, from Satan, sin and death. God has a land of milk and honey ahead of you; God Himself will be with you and be your God. Imagine now an Israelite experiencing this, and saying, 'I must go back to Egypt'. It is unimaginable. Christ is our Passover Lamb, there is no greater Savior, no greater deliverance that can be had. To turn back to our sins is like a slave longing for their chains.

Do you see Paul's double incentive? Purge the old leaven because you are leavened. Leave Egypt behind because Christ as your Passover Lamb has delivered you!

Keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread

V8, '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.' Here is Paul's third leaven metaphor. You will notice that Paul uses the language of 'festival' in the singular, but technically the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are two feasts that overlap. The day of the Passover feast would be preceded by the scouring of the house to remove the leaven in preparation for the Feast of Unleavened Bread Ex. 12:15. Passover is a single meal but officially kicked off the week that celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Paul is using these relations of these two feasts to describe sin and salvation.

Paul is communicating in metaphorical terms what we mean by repentance. When a person becomes a Christian, in recognizing how wrong their sin is, how punishable it is, and how Christ is the only one who can satisfy our sin debts; we recognize that in becoming a follower of Christ we put away all the old ways of sin and self. Repentance was a regular ingredient in the preaching of the apostles when they were taking the gospel to the world, Paul summarizes his preaching to the Ephesian elders this way, Acts 20:21, 'testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.' We lived by our own law not God's; we pursued the lusts of our hearts and minds and did not walk in the Spirit. The old value systems that we used to justify our sins have been called out as lies. We sign this in our baptisms. Our baptisms are in one sense a funeral. We are dying with Christ and putting to death that person that lived like a puppet on a string, as if God did not exist, is no longer us. We have become servants of Christ, we have lost that old life and taken up our crosses to live a new life of obedience. We do not try to cling to as much of our old lives as possible, we recognize that those sins were lies and cannot satisfy. We have fully committed ourselves to walking in God's ways, in accordance with His law, in the ways of His commandments, walking in the Spirit. We did not call Him Lord, Boss, Master, God, but now we do, and this shows in who we obey.

Paul characterizes the life that follows this break with sin in salvation in the picture language of the Feast of Unleavened Bread following the Passover. It is a beautiful picture isn't it. We get delivered by Christ, and the way we celebrate that deliverance is by putting away anything associated with Egypt, with our old

life. In particular Paul emphasizes malice and evil. Malice would refer to the unloving way we treat other people when we are suspicious of them, speak badly about them, offer them no common courtesy, sin against them in various ways. And evil would be a general description of those things in opposition to holiness that fill our lives. Extending the metaphor Paul calls upon the Corinthians to celebrate with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. That word sincerity is a key one it means genuineness or purity. It refers to singleness of heart and not being double minded or having your heart split between two loyalties. The Christian life is not one of one foot in our sins and one foot in Christ, it is a singleminded pushing on with Christ. It is also interesting that Paul contrasts the old leaven/sin with truth. And that is because sin is a lie. Sin is a false promise of peace and satisfaction. It lives by a false law, serves a false God, and pursues a false end. To live in the truth is to live recognizing that sin is bad, forgiven, defeated, it is to recognize the gospel and what it has accomplished in relation to sin.

We should heed Paul's words. We forget that this world is not our home, that we are saved from Egypt and are to leave the old behind as we strive to become a new and holy people for God. This applies to us individually and corporately. We must beware the danger of sin, recognize that we are unleavened and therefore purge the old leaven. We must recognize that great Savior and salvation that we have and live in a way that honours these truths not the lies of sin.