

Sermon 17: 1 Corinthians 5:9-13: The Church and the World

OUTLINE

The Church in the world
The World out the Church

INTRODUCTION

We have all heard the saying, 'We are to be in the world but not of it.' This is a great summary of what Paul is saying in this final part in 1 Corinthians 5 as he talks about the matter of church discipline. Paul we know had written a previous letter than this one to the Corinthian church, this is apparent by 1 Cor. 5:9, 'I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.' Paul, as in all of his letters was likely calling upon the Corinthians to be sexually pure, and warned them about being associated with sexually immoral people who claimed to be believers. The Corinthians seem to have misunderstood this statement by Paul and Paul has caught wind of it, either by their letter or by report. Did they misunderstand it deliberately or in ignorance? Some think they deliberately misunderstood Paul, perhaps because it was too hard to do it if the man in question had a high social status. It is possible they hid behind the seeming impossibility of having nothing to do with sexually immoral people, making a thing look absurd so as to give themselves an excuse not to do it. Others think that they genuinely misunderstood Paul, perhaps in a legalistic zeal they attempted a commune style church where they had no dealings with unbelievers. This would then leave them with the paradox of those who were trying very hard to disentangle themselves from the world having high walls between them and the world. All the while tolerating sin inside their walls because belonging to their group was more important than the sin itself. An unexpected yet sadly typical mix of legalism towards those who are outside, with laxity towards those who are inside.

Paul in 5:9-13 makes some clarifications to help them see that the church is to be in the world but not of it. That the act of judging sin in church discipline does not extend outside the church but is to be practiced inside the church. We will divide these verses into two parts looking firstly at the question of the church being in the world; and then secondly at the issue of the world in the church and how we are to deal with it.

The church in the world

V9-10, '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.' You will notice that Paul used the word 'associate'. This is not a word that indicates casual acquaintance but a word that speaks of intimate and even formal acquaintance. Paul intended to mean that as believers, we are only to join ourselves in solidarity, in association, in fellowship with those who are believers with a credible confession of faith. This means that outwardly there is no obvious impenitent sin which would put a lie to their profession. But we should not only limit this to matters of lifestyle. Because what we believe and not only how we live mark us outwardly as true believers, Paul would agree that we should not associate, have solidarity with, nor have close fellowship with those who deny key doctrines like the deity of Christ, or the Trinity, or justification by

faith alone. The Corinthians mistook this meaning of Paul to think that Christians should have no dealings whatsoever with sinners in general. Here Paul clarifies that this is not what he meant.

He stresses in v10 that he did not mean the sexually immoral of this world. And you will notice that Paul does not want to limit the matter to sexual sin but all sin, and so he expands his list of sins to include other sins, 'or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters.' We will come back to discuss these sins shortly. But notice how Paul highlights through showing the absurdity of the notion that this is an impossible meaning because it would mean that we would have to have dealings with no one whatsoever, 'since then you would need to go out of the world.' Paul is coming up against the immature reaction on the part of young believers who in their enthusiasm to put away sin put away everything including the good gifts of God in this world. There is a form of legalism that tries to keep itself pure by amputating everything. There is a weakness in all of us that when we see how easily we sin, how quickly we can be led astray by having dealings with those who would lead us astray we can enter into an isolationist mindset as the remedy rather than leaning into the strength that the Spirit provides. There is a false view of separation that Paul is refuting here. Paul is helping us to see that we are to be in the world as the church, but not of it. He is implying that God's grace is sufficient to protect you, preserve you, strengthen you, and use you in this dark world. When overcome by your sin; when in horror of the sin that is all around us, it is natural to want to be away from this world. There is a real good in this desire, for to live is Christ but to die is gain, it is far better to be at home with the Lord. But we have to ensure that this does not lead to an overreaction on our part where we retreat from the world altogether, circling the wagons and try to be more holy through isolation.

Jesus prayed along these lines in His High Priestly prayer, John 17:15-18, 'I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.' We cannot withdraw from the world because we have been sent into it. Jesus has purposed the church with a being the light of the world that shines in the midst of crooked and perverse generation, it is our duty then to make sure that we are a light and not tainted with darkness and that we shine that light without fear. Jesus has given us to the world to be salt. Salt can be painful, salt has a preserving effect, salt can have a medicinal effect. For this reason we have to be out of the salt shaker, and we must make sure that we do not lose our saltiness. God loves you and intends to glorify you with Himself away from all sin, but He has left you on earth for a reason, with a mission. He is not negligent and needlessly exposing His beloved bride to sin for no reason, but because there is a war. He has given us armour, weaponry, heavenly support, and we have marching orders to go. It is all good and well to look at this world and mourn its sin, to long for your heavenly home, to pray for Christ to come quickly, but let us not neglect the reason we are here. Is this the identity you put on this morning? Is this the primary way which shapes how you do all your daily tasks?

The world out the church

V11, '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.' Here Paul gets

to the heart of the matter. Paul is not asking us to take responsibility and apply church discipline to those who are in the world, but only those who say they are Christians, who have been outwardly marked as Christians by baptism, who are in their town in their church, who are impenitent in sin; it is they who we are to discipline and as part of our discipline not associate with them. Let us look first at the types of sinners Paul lists here, and then we will look at what Paul means by not associating, and not even eating with such a one.

Paul has many vice lists in his letters, often those lists are generic addressing sin generally. But it is thought that the list that Paul puts forward here is not a general description of sin but a pointing out of the particular sins that he is aware of in the Corinthian church. Notice how the sins mentioned here line up with the issues Paul addresses. Sexual immorality is an obvious one, we are busy dealing with a matter of incest, but in 6:12-20 it will come up again. Paul is saying that those confessed Christians who are members of your local church who are living in sexual sin, be it fornication, adultery, incest, visiting prostitutes, etc, these are under our jurisdiction and it is our duty to apply church discipline to them.

Next in the list is greed. Please notice that greed and swindlers are put together side by side in v10, and both are found in this little list in v11. Here is one definition for greedy, '*a greedy, covetous, rapacious, acquisitive, self-aggrandizing person; a defrauder, one who tramples on the rights of others.*'¹ And here is a definition for swindler, '*snatching, robbing, greedy: subst. swindler, extortioner*'² Now have a look down at 6:8, 'But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!' It is clear that there were those who were greedy and extorting their brothers and sisters in Christ using the community of the church as their clientele base and who they were in turn sinfully even illegally ripping them off. Paul is saying that if there are people who are guilty of ripping people of with shady business practices; who are engaged in illegal business practices for gain, these confessing believers are to be put under church discipline by the local church.

Third in the list are the idolaters. In Paul's letter in chapters 8-10 we find Paul dealing with the matter of meat offered to idols, it is apparent that there were those who were returning to their old practices and getting caught up in idol feasts, and were also partaking of the Lord's Supper. And so he says in 1 Cor. 10:21, 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.' What Paul is implying to the Corinthians is that if there are any who insist on continuing to associate with their old idols, if there are any Christians who have been baptized into their church and who share the supper with them, and yet they go worshipping with other faiths, these if they will not repent must be put under church discipline. Fourth mentioned are 'revilers.' We have spent a lot of time so far dealing with divisions in the Corinthian church. There was a party spirit where people were following teachers who taught worldly wisdom instead of a Christ centered cross centered message. What normally happens when divisions arise, we make an enemy of those we disagree with and a slander campaign is waged, an ad campaign where we make our enemies look dumb casting their message into a poor light, and by this the gospel and our brethren are caught in the crossfire.

1 Alexander Souter, [*A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 204.

2 Alexander Souter, [*A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 38.

Paul is saying here, that when you have someone who is dividing the church, who is speaking ill of God's word and those who are appointed to teach it, that is a seditious and destructive element that must be put out. Paul says as much to Titus 3:10-11, 'As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.'

Fifthly, Paul talks about the drunkard. Can you think of anything related to drunkenness in 1 Corinthians? 1 Cor. 11:21 talks about those who were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. This may also be those who could not get rid of the free booze at idol feasts and made sure they got their fix there too, 10:21.

Alcohol is not a sin but drunkenness is. The description that Paul gives here of 'drunkard' is someone who repeatedly sins in this way, the same with all the other sins mentioned here. It is not a one off instance of someone who feel and then repented, but someone who impenitently goes on sinning in this way. Our jurisdiction, and our duty in applying church discipline is in the case of those in our local church who call themselves Christians and who are living in denial of their confession.

Now we want to consider what Paul means by not associate, in such a way so as to include, not even to eat with such as these who continue to insist they are Christian but who continue to persist in their sin. There are a few important points that we need to recognize, firstly, that the words 'do not associate' can mean more than one thing, depending on the situation. In Paul's writings we find that there is not only one thing that he means by the words 'not to associate.' Paul uses the same Greek word in 2 Thess. 3:14-15, 'If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.' It is clear that these are two different cases. One is a case of crass immorality that needs sudden and drastic amputation, and the not associating includes extreme action like not even eating with the man. The other has to do with someone who has a wrong eschatology which has probably led him to not working and he is now idle and spending his time in a disruptive way being a busybody. Paul issues a warning for that sort of person to work, and if they will not, to have nothing to do with them but in a way that does not cut them off as an unbeliever, but still recognizes them as a brother. In the case of incest the disciplinary process is assumed and Paul is leading the church in the final act of discipline and handing over to satan. But in the case of the idle man, things have not yet progressed to the final phase of church discipline. Paul is encouraging the use of reproof to bring about shame and in the hopes that godly repentance will produce change. I can imagine that if this state of affairs persisted and these idle men continued not working and dividing the church, Paul would repeat what he said to Titus, 3:10-11, 'As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.'

Paul expects the community of the church to play a part in applying some form of social pressure that will encourage repentance. In the case of final excommunication what does it mean to not associate? Does it mean that if your child and theirs are invited to the birthday party of another you must not go? Does it mean that you cannot greet the person, or shake their hand if you meet in the streets? Does it mean that if you work at the same place that you should eat your lunch somewhere else during lunch break? If the disciplined person is a spouse or a child living at home does it mean that you or they should move out? The answers to all of these are no. John MacArthur agrees and writes, 'The

command not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the purpose of admonishment and restoration and no other.’³

Depending on the sin in question many churches even allow and encourage the person under discipline to attend the worship services and sit under the word because the Spirit attends the preaching of the Word of God and that is exactly what they need to hear. 1 Cor. 14:23 indicates that the early church did not practice closed meetings but allowed outsiders and unbelievers to attend the meetings. I have in the past had to ask a man who had offended against a child that attended my church not to come to my church but to attend somewhere else, but in cases where it is possible attendance and sitting under the word of God should be encouraged. In our modern context not associating would involve dissolving all formal association. They would be removed from the members role; they would not be allowed to attend the business meetings of the church; they would be barred from the celebration of the Lord’s Supper until they had repented. In the instances of those who are not members but are living in sin, we are not able to take matters to the membership to administer discipline so in those instances the elders approach the individual to discuss their sin and if they do not repent request that they not partake of the table. How does one navigate the informal association with someone under discipline? Be friendly, be gentle, and direct your interaction to the elephant in the room. At present I am in regular phone contact with a man who is under discipline by a sister church. I allow for these phone calls in order to use them to preach God’s word, and in every phone call I use the opportunity to call them to repentance and impress upon them the seriousness of their sin in some way. If at any point I sense that the phone calls are being used for something else, or if I cannot continue to talk about sin and the need for repentance then I would drop them. A rule of thumb that I follow is by making a distinction between fellowship and social engagement. What would I do with a brother or sister in Christ in the name of fellowship? I would pray with them, share biblical truths with them, I would sing Christian songs with them, discuss doctrinal interests, I would engage in activity that expresses my unity in Christ with them. If someone were under discipline I would socially engage with them, but not in the way I would fellowship with my brethren in Christ.

Now I know that this will seem harsh and alien and judgmental in our present cultural moment, but as Christians we do have different priorities. God’s holiness, the gospel, our identity as believers and our duty towards one another in this regard feature in our thinking, direct our paths, and cannot be put in the background to make ourselves less socially awkward. We do not want to go around in the world acting judgmental against everyone’s sin and disassociating ourselves with them, that is not our jurisdiction, discipline is applied in the church but not outside of it. And so Paul adds, v12-13, ‘For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?’¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” There is much to say on this matter of judging, and I will come back to these verses next time.

3 Daniel L. Akin, [“The Basics of Church Discipline \(1 Corinthians 5\).”](#) in *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 111.

But I would like to close by raising a matter that lies close to what we are discussing and that is the matter of membership. In the early church membership did not exist separate to baptism, your baptism implied your membership. As time has moved on, sadly these things have become separated, we have adopted the practice of baptizing into membership for this reason. But the reality of excluding people from the defined people of God can only happen if there is some official membership that is recognized, there can be no exclusion if there is no inclusion. Sadly, many Christians drift in and out of churches. They are not in a covenanted, committed and recognized relationship of mutual accountability and partnership with a local body. Let me volunteer that if you are not a member of a local church you are not benefitting from the gift of God to the church, the gift of a mutual accountability where we in a joint and official way represent Christ on earth, maintain the holiness of an identifiable people, and work as a committed partnership. Sadly, if churches did try and practice church discipline without a membership commitment, today someone would simply leave their church and go to the church down the road. Fellowship is cheap, commitment is low, accountability is denied, consequences are avoided. But if we commit to membership, even submitting ourselves to one another and being willing to be held accountable for our sins and not imitate the expressive individualism of the world, then we can gain the benefit of this gift. Paul records for us that this man in question did repent, and encourages a full reinstatement of the man, 2 Cor. 2:5-11, 'Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.' God is in the business of saving and restoring sinners, church discipline is part of God's provision to help us stay the course.