

Introduction.

We live in the time between the ascension of the Lord and His return. What the bible calls the last days.

In the opening chapters of this letter Paul has begun to lay out a sketch of the interplay between God's power and the importance of our response as we await the Lord's return. He has spoken of this as being like farmers sowing and watering but God granting the growth. He has spoken of different builders building but Jesus being the foundation. He has spoken about salvation being assured for those who accept Jesus as Lord but rewards and losses in the Kingdom being dependent on how we build.

Last week in Chapter 4 we heard that the Corinthians had a distorted view of how they should live in the light of the security of their salvation. They thought it should be one big party until the Lord returned. Paul has to remind them of his own experience: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹²We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world – right up to this moment."

Accepting Jesus as Lord means that we are called to imitate Paul as he imitates our Lord. This is what it means to be a disciple and to build up the church with costly metals and stones. We do so as we live the costly life of true discipleship.

Paul now proceeds to apply these principles to specific pastoral situations which have arisen in the Corinthian church. In doing so he also reveals some of the tensions which we face if we are to avoid building with wood, hay and straw.

Exposition

The first issue seems as shocking to us as it was to Paul. A man is having sex with his father's wife – his step mother. People tend to think that sex was invented in the 1960's but actually sex was invented by God as part of creation. So there is very little that is new. The Pagan's of Paul's day would have been involved in all kinds of sexual practices which would be shocking and not to say illegal in C21st Britain yet not even they condoned sleeping with your step-mother.

How had a Christian church ended up thinking that this should not only be tolerated but praised? Well, it goes back to their belief that they have been set free from the law. Christianity has freed them from so much of the oppressive traditions and laws of man-made religion. Surely everything is now permissible. They are now so wise – they understand things so clearly – that they are no

longer bound by religious laws or social norms. This is radical Christianity in the raw.

If Jesus has died for all our sin, past, present and future – surely it can do no harm to express our love in whatever way seems right to us. What we do with their bodies is irrelevant what matters is our spirit. We can take pride in our tolerant behaviour as a sign of our great understanding of our freedom from the law and our acceptance of all no matter how they behave.

This is the so-called Wisdom that Paul has been warning them about. Very clever but wrong. As he will write later “everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial.” There are moral boundaries. There are some behaviours which are right and some which are wrong. When church leaders tolerate or affirm the behaviour of their church members which God condemns we defile the living temple which God is building.

To illustrate this Paul uses a metaphor based on the Passover. He does not choose this feast at random. The earlier church quickly recognised the significance of timing of Jesus death during the Passover celebrations. The Passover remembered God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery. As you will recall Israelites were commanded to mark their doors with the blood of a sacrificed lamb and God passed over those homes bringing judgement only on those households who had ignored His warnings.

As the freed Israelites were then to flee from slavery in haste they had no time to bake bread with yeast and allow time for it to rise. They had to eat bread without yeast. So each year to this very day when the Passover is celebrated Jews clear their homes of yeast. Yeast is often used as a symbol of sin – because if you get a little bit of it in a batch of dough the whole batch becomes infested with yeast.

This is how it is with churches Paul says. We now live in daily celebration of our deliverance from slavery to sin and death. The way we celebrate our freedom is not by indulging ever more freely in malice and wickedness but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Ok, so the principle is that what we do with our bodies still matters and the behaviours we affirm in our gathered communities matter.

Paul seeks to correct their over-emphasis on tolerance. They should not be proud and boast of their tolerance but rather have gone into mourning and have put out of their fellowship the man who has been doing this. They should hand him over to the accuser so that rather than indulging the flesh he is convicted and his spirit brought back to salvation. This is rather draconian but Paul is seeking to make a point at a crucial time in the church’s development. There are only a few believers

in Corinth and they are the only gospel which the rest of the community see. What they have seen affirmed by the church is not something to boast about but to be ashamed of. They have misrepresented the way of Christ. This is a very serious matter.

Before we apply this teaching on church discipline in our churches today we need to balance Paul's hard line here with his contrasting comments in his next letter to the Corinthians... 2 Cor 2

⁵ If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent – not to put it too severely. ⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ Another reason I wrote to you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

This re-affirms that Paul's motivation is pastoral and that all his actions are performed in a profound atmosphere of prayer with the power of the Lord Jesus present. Paul also wrote the 13th Chapter of this letter which outlines the true meaning of love. Tolerance is not always loving. Intolerance is not always unloving. It is not loving to believe someone is heading the wrong direction and not mention it. But let's be honest this is quite an extreme case and extreme cases make bad law.

Paul goes on to make a clear an important distinction between the way we relate to those who profess to be brothers and sisters in Christ and those who do not. ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people –¹⁰ not 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.¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister^[c] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

Three brief points

1) We are in no position to make judgements on those who are unbelievers.
John 3:17a

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world...

... and he did not send you to do so either!

When we seek to make unbelievers live by our moral standards we set an impossible task. We can't live flawless lives and we have the power of the Spirit to help us. Even believers can only be holy in God's sight thanks to His continual gracious forgiveness and cleansing.

2) Paul sets sexual immorality alongside, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness and swindling. We often elevate sexual sin above all others but all of these behaviours act like yeast in the dough. When we do not defend one another against these behaviours the church becomes puffed up but largely hollow.

3) I will unpack some biblical guidelines on how we apply this teaching next week – so hold off on cancelling any dinner dates just yet!

Response

The behaviour of individual believers in a church is not just a personal matter between them and God. Your behaviour impacts on the whole church. This is hard for us to accept because of our individualistic culture. We discover by the revelation of scripture that if individuals are sexually immoral or greedy, idolaters or slanderers, drunkards or swindlers that erodes the whole church. When such behaviours become public we have a duty to address these as a church especially if it is a leader. Paul has demonstrated that the way we address this is motivated by pastoral concern both for the individual and for the wider church. **In our response I want to avoid us seeking to take the speck out of our brother's eye whilst we have a log in our own. So let's start with our own lives.**

Yes we are forgiven and cleansed in Christ – no one knew that better than the apostle Paul - but our behaviour choices still matter because they can often speak more loudly than our sermons. How often are thriving ministries decimated by these behaviours?

Equally when you are sincere and truthful that builds up the church. The apostle Peter wrote: Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. ([1 Peter 2:12](#))

Living good lives and doing good deeds matters but we should know by now that we cannot achieve that by our efforts to be nicer. We must go on being filled with the Spirit and transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Let's get rid of the old yeast, so that we may be a new unleavened batch – as we really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.