

When the Church Won't Talk About It

*Sin, Silence, and the Scandal of a Grace That Never
Costs Anything*

1 Corinthians 5:1–2 (ESV)

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. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

1 Corinthians 5:6–8 (ESV)

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

1 Corinthians 5:9–13 (ESV)

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — 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. 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. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.

There are two kinds of sermons a preacher walks to the pulpit to preach. There are the sermons he wants to preach, and there are the sermons he has to preach. The sermons he wants to preach are the ones where everyone leaves encouraged and the offering goes well. The sermons he has to preach are the ones that keep him awake at three in the morning, the ones where he knows the congregation needs what he is about to say more than they want to

hear it. First Corinthians chapter five is that second kind of sermon. There is no soft entry into this text. Paul does not warm up slowly. He opens with a hammer.

"It is actually reported." That phrase in the Greek — *holos akouetai* — carries the weight of a formal accusation.

- It is the language of a public charge. Paul is not whispering a rumor.
- He is naming something that has already been circulating in the ancient world beyond the walls of the church in Corinth.
- The story had already traveled across the Aegean Sea and reached Paul while he was in Ephesus. Word had gotten out. The world knew. The church was the last one still pretending it did not.

A man in the Corinthian congregation was living in an ongoing sexual relationship with his stepmother — his father's wife.

- This was not a moment of weakness or a private fall someone was working through. This was an established, known arrangement.

- And here is what makes this text one of the most devastating passages in the entire New Testament: **Roman law under the Lex Julia de adulteriis specifically prohibited this kind of relationship.**
- The pagan Stoic philosophers condemned it.
- The culture surrounding the church found it reprehensible.

Paul writes with words that should shake every preacher to his foundation: this was immorality of a kind "not tolerated even among pagans." The church of Jesus Christ, filled with the gifts of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, operating in prophecy, debating theology with sophistication — **that church had managed to descend below the moral floor of the city it was supposed to be saving.**

The most dangerous church is not the one that is openly wicked. The most dangerous church is the one that is spiritually gifted and morally asleep at the same time.

But what Paul says next is what turns this from a moral problem into a theological emergency.

- He does not say, "And you are horrified." He does not say, "And you are ashamed."
- He says, "And you are arrogant." That word in the Greek is phusioo — puffed up, inflated like a balloon, swollen with pride.
- The Corinthian church had taken their silence about this man's sin and converted it into a badge of their own theological sophistication. They believed their willingness to look the other way demonstrated how far above judgment they had risen.

THEY THOUGHT IT MADE THEM LOOK GRACIOUS. PAUL SAYS IT MADE THEM LOOK CARNAL.

I want to be honest with you about something before I preach this sermon.

- This is not a text about that church back then.
- This is a mirror held up to every church that has ever gathered in the name of Jesus and made peace with what God has called it to confront.
- This is about the silence that spreads across sanctuaries when the truth is inconvenient.
- This is about the sophistication we use to dress up our cowardice.

THIS IS ABOUT THE GRACE WE INVOKE AS A REASON TO NEVER SAY THE HARD THING TO THE PERSON WHO NEEDS TO HEAR IT.

**THE CHURCH THAT WILL
NOT CONFRONT CANNOT HEAL.**

This chapter gives us three things.

- It gives us the scandal the church refused to name.
- It gives us the seriousness of what silence costs the body.
- It gives us the surprising mercy hidden inside the very discipline the church was too proud to exercise.

Three points. One nail. And we are going to drive it all the way home.

I. The Silence That Became a Sin

Before we can talk about what this church needed to do, we have to talk about what it refused to do. And what it refused to do was simply name what was

happening. Not judge it harshly. Not execute a verdict. Just name it. That one act of naming — that one moment of holy honesty — was the thing they could not bring themselves to do.

Paul does not accuse the Corinthian church of celebrating sin. He accuses them of celebrating themselves for tolerating it. That is a more sophisticated form of corruption. They had constructed a theological framework in which their silence was evidence of their maturity. To speak about the man's condition would have been, in their estimation, judgmental. To leave it unaddressed was, in their estimation, gracious. **Paul calls this arrogance** — because it is.

IT IS THE ARROGANCE OF A CHURCH THAT HAS BECOME SO IMPRESSED WITH ITS OWN ENLIGHTENMENT THAT IT HAS LOST THE ABILITY TO BE BROKEN OVER THE THINGS THAT BREAK THE HEART OF GOD.

1 Corinthians 5:2 (ESV)

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

That word "mourn" in the Greek is pentheo — it is the word used for grief at a graveside, for lamentation over the dead.

- Paul is saying: someone in your congregation is in a state of spiritual emergency, and you are not acting like a church that recognizes an emergency. You are acting like a church at a dinner party.
- The appropriate response to a believer walking toward destruction is not theological detachment. It is grief. It is the kind of grief that moves.

YOU CANNOT GRIEVE WHAT YOU HAVE DECIDED NOT TO SEE AND YOU CANNOT RESTORE WHAT YOU REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE IS BROKEN.

John Chrysostom — Homilies on First Corinthians (4th century)

They were puffed up, not because the fornicator had done no wrong, but because they themselves were not grieving. For this was the greatest symptom of their disease — that they were proud in the midst of such great wickedness.

Chrysostom identified the disease with precision. **The problem was not merely what the man was**

doing in private. The problem was what the congregation was doing in public — which was nothing. And their public inaction was accompanied by private boasting. They had turned their inability to mourn into a spiritual virtue. That is one of the most subtle and lethal forms of carnality that can take root in a congregation.

WATCH THIS.

Paul draws a direct line between the church's silence and the church's arrogance. These are not two separate issues. They are the same issue expressed in two different ways.

- The congregation that will not speak the truth is always a congregation that has put something above the truth. In Corinth, they had put their reputation for theological tolerance above their responsibility to the man who was destroying himself inside their fellowship. And Paul will not let them have both. He says: you must choose between your pride and his soul.

NOT: Silence is not the same as peace.

BUT: Silence is sometimes the loudest form of agreement the church can give.

NOT: Tolerance is not the same as love.

BUT: Real love tells the truth even when the truth costs something to say.

NOT: Looking away from a wound is not grace.

BUT: Looking away from a wound is negligence that wears a theological costume.

There is a form of spiritual cowardice that dresses itself in the language of pastoral sensitivity. It says, "I don't want to be judgmental." It says, "Who am I to say anything?" It says, "I'm going to trust the Holy Spirit to handle it." All of those statements can be true in the right context. In the wrong context — which is the context of a person walking toward a cliff while the community watches — they are simply a way of making peace with the sound of your own silence.

THE CHURCH THAT WILL NOT MOURN CANNOT HEAL. THE CHURCH THAT WILL NOT NAME CANNOT ADDRESS. THE CHURCH THAT WILL NOT CONFRONT CANNOT RESTORE. AND THE CHURCH THAT HAS TRADED ITS HOLY DISCOMFORT FOR THEOLOGICAL SOPHISTICATED HAS TRADED ITS POWER FOR ITS PRIDE.

Tell your neighbor: "God loves you too much to leave you where He found you."

Shepherds do not watch wolves approach the flock and talk themselves out of intervening because they are afraid of appearing confrontational. Shepherds fight. That is what shepherds do.

Now here is where this gets even more serious. Because it would be easy to hear Point One and think the issue is simply a leadership failure — that the elders dropped the ball, that the pastor should have said something sooner. But Paul moves in verse six to something much larger than a personnel problem. He shows us that unaddressed sin inside the body of Christ does not stay contained. It spreads. And once you understand how it spreads, you cannot look at this chapter the same way again.

II. The Leaven That Leavens in the Dark

Paul does not stay on the individual. He zooms out to the whole congregation. Because the question is no longer only about one man's sin. The question is now about what the whole body does when one part of it is in crisis and the rest of it pretends not to notice.

In verse six Paul reaches into the most universally understood image in the Jewish world and builds one of the most powerful theological arguments in Scripture. He writes: **"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"**

- Every Jewish household in that congregation understood exactly what he meant.
- In preparation for Passover, the Jewish family was required by the Torah to remove every trace of leaven from the home. Not most of it. Not the visible portions. Every trace.

Because... **LEAVEN DOES NOT STAY IN ONE PLACE. LEAVEN IS NOT PASSIVE. LEAVEN MOVES, PENETRATES, AND TRANSFORMS EVERY PART OF THE LUMP IT TOUCHES.**

ζύμη (*zume*) — leaven — an agent of fermentation that works invisibly through the whole lump

1 Corinthians 5:6–7 (ESV)

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 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.

Paul is telling the Corinthians something they did not want to hear: the sin you are refusing to address is not staying where you left it. It is working its way through the congregation. Unaddressed sin inside the covenant community functions exactly like yeast in dough — silently, invisibly, comprehensively. You cannot see it working. You cannot feel it moving. By the time you notice the difference, it has already gone everywhere.

WHAT YOU PERMIT IN YOUR HOUSE YOU EVENTUALLY NORMALIZE. WHAT YOU NORMALIZE YOU EVENTUALLY CELEBRATE. WHAT YOU CELEBRATE YOU EVENTUALLY BECOME. THE LEAVEN ALWAYS FINISHES ITS WORK.

Now watch Paul's theological genius in verse seven. **He does not simply say, "Clean up your act." He**

grounds the call to holiness inside the death of Jesus Christ. He says: cleanse out the old leaven — because Christ, our Passover lamb, has already been sacrificed.

- Do you understand what he is doing?
- He is saying that the reason you deal with sin in the body of Christ is not because you are self-righteous. It is not because you are harsh. It is because the Passover Lamb has been slain.
- The blood has already been applied. The leaven should already be gone.

TO IGNORE THE SIN IN THE CONGREGATION IS TO LIVE AS IF THE CROSS DID NOT HAPPEN.

WATCH THIS.

The Passover was not merely a religious ceremony in ancient Israel. The Passover was the night that death itself passed over the homes that had the blood on the doorpost. **The lamb died so the household would live. The blood was applied so the destroyer could not enter.** And Paul is saying to the church at Corinth — and to every church that reads these words in every generation — the Lamb has been sacrificed. His blood is on the doorpost of every life that receives

Him. So why is there still leaven in the house? Why are you celebrating the sacrifice while protecting what the sacrifice was supposed to displace?

- *The Lamb has been slain — so purge the leaven.*
- *The price has been paid — so honor what was purchased.*
- *The blood has been applied — so live like it actually means something.*

You are already unleavened in Christ — so stop living as if you are not.

Somebody say: "The cross demands something of me."

Karl Barth — Church Dogmatics, Volume IV

The holiness of the community is not a private possession distributed among individual members. It is a corporate reality that the body of Christ either protects together or surrenders together. When the community makes peace with what contradicts its calling, it has not merely failed an individual. It has made a theological statement about what it believes the gospel actually produces.

Barth understood something the Corinthians had forgotten: **THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH IS NOT OPTIONAL ORNAMENTATION ON TOP OF THE GOSPEL. IT IS EVIDENCE OF THE GOSPEL.** When the body of Christ looks the same as the world around it, the world has no reason to believe that Jesus changes anything. The church's moral distinctiveness is not a preference. It is a proclamation.

THE CHURCH THAT LOOKS LIKE EVERYTHING CANNOT BE SALT FOR ANYTHING. SALT THAT HAS LOST ITS SALTINESS IS NOT GENTLE SALT. IT IS USELESS SALT. JESUS SAID IT HIMSELF — IT IS FIT FOR NOTHING BUT TO BE THROWN OUT AND TRAMPLED UNDERFOOT.

Now I need to move to the hardest part of this text — the part that most preachers skip over because it sounds harsh, and the part that is actually the most merciful thing Paul says in the entire chapter. Because once you understand what Paul is asking the church to do, and why he is asking them to do it, you will never read the words 'church discipline' the same way again.

III. The Love That Looks Like Letting Go

Everything Paul has said up to this point has been preparing us for something that sounds like the harshest command in the entire chapter but is actually the most compassionate. He is about to tell this church to let a man go. And he is going to tell them that letting him go is the most loving thing they could possibly do.

1 Corinthians 5:3–5 (ESV)

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. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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.

"Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." Twenty-first century readers hear that phrase and flinch. It sounds brutal. It sounds like a spiritual execution order. But the ancient church read

these words through a completely different lens, and the difference between those two readings is the difference between misunderstanding this text and being transformed by it.

- In Paul's cosmology, the covenant community gathered in the name of Jesus existed under the covering and protection of the Lord.
- To be removed from that community — to be placed back into the world outside the covenant — was to be returned to the domain that Paul elsewhere describes as the domain of the enemy.
- It was to experience, in the present moment, the full spiritual weight of the direction the man was already choosing to walk.
- **The removal was not a punishment designed to destroy him. It was a consequence severe enough to produce repentance.**

And Paul makes the goal explicit. He does not hide it in theological jargon. He writes it plainly: "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

- The purpose of the discipline is not condemnation.
- The purpose of the discipline is salvation.

- Paul is not writing this man off. He is refusing to write him off so completely that he allows the man to stay comfortable in a condition that will cost him everything in eternity.
- The most loving thing the church could do was to make the present cost of his choice impossible to ignore.

GOD DOES NOT DISCIPLINE HIS CHILDREN BECAUSE HE HAS STOPPED LOVING THEM. GOD DISCIPLINES HIS CHILDREN BECAUSE HE REFUSES TO STOP. THE HAND THAT CORRECTS YOU IS THE SAME HAND THAT REFUSES TO LET YOU GO.

WATCH THIS.

Think about the parable of the prodigal son. The father in that story does not chase his boy to the far country and try to make the far country comfortable for him. He does not show up with furniture and a care package and help him decorate the pigpen. He lets the boy feel what the far country actually costs. And Luke chapter fifteen tells us that it was only when the boy "came to himself" — only when the full weight of his circumstances landed on him without the cushion of someone else softening the blow — that he got up and

went back to his father. The father's refusal to rescue the boy from the consequences of his choice was itself an act of love. It created the conditions for restoration.

Luke 15:17–20 (NIV)

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The prodigal's father did not follow him to the far country. But he never stopped watching the road. **That is the posture Paul is calling the Corinthian church to take toward this man. Do not follow him into his destruction and call it love. But do not stop watching the road either. The goal is always, always, always restoration.**

Tertullian — On Repentance (early 3rd century)

The discipline of the church is a medicine, not a wound. It is not designed to destroy the sinner but to interrupt the destruction the sinner has already begun. A physician who refuses to prescribe the painful remedy because he fears the patient's discomfort has not loved the patient. He has abandoned him to the illness.

I need to say something directly to pastors and leaders in this room, because this text has been used by controlling leaders to wound people and call it correction.

- Paul is not handing the church a license to exercise power over people through manufactured accusations, theological disagreements, or personality conflicts.
- He is addressing a specific, sustained, unrepentant, public sin that was actively destroying the individual and contaminating the community around him.
- The corrective measure is proportional to the crisis. And the goal — always the goal — is that the spirit of the man would be saved.

DISCIPLINE WITHOUT LOVE IS CRUELTY WITH A THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION. LOVE

WITHOUT DISCIPLINE IS A SLOW-MOTION FUNERAL THAT CALLS ITSELF GRACE.

CHURCH CORRECTION IS NOT REJECTION OF THE PERSON. IT IS A REFUSAL TO VALIDATE THE DIRECTION THE PERSON IS WALKING.

REMOVING SOMEONE FROM FELLOWSHIP IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY. IT IS A DESPERATE INVITATION BACK TO THE FATHER'S HOUSE.

GOD'S CORRECTION IS NOT HIS REJECTION. IT IS HIS REFUSAL TO LET YOU GO!

And here is the final word in this chapter that most readers walk right past. Paul closes in verse thirteen by quoting from Deuteronomy: "Purge the evil person from among you."

- In the original wilderness context, that language was used to protect the integrity of the community that carried the presence of God.

- The body of people who live under the cloud of God's glory cannot indefinitely carry what contradicts it.
- Not because God is unforgiving — but because the fire of His presence and the leaven of unaddressed rebellion cannot occupy the same space without something eventually giving way.

The same cross that demands holiness provides the power for it. You were not called to clean yourself up before you came. You were called to come, and let the blood do what blood does. But once the blood has been applied — once the Lamb has been your Passover — YOU CANNOT LIVE AS IF THE SACRIFICE MEANT NOTHING.

THE SAME CROSS THAT DEMANDS HOLINESS PROVIDES THE POWER FOR IT.

So here is where everything Paul has said in this chapter comes together. The silence was a sin. The leaven was spreading. The discipline was mercy. And now Paul draws one final line that sets the church free from a burden it was never supposed to

carry — and gives it back the mission it was created to fulfill.

Conclusion:

Before I close, **I need to show you something in verses nine through thirteen that the church in every generation has gotten completely backwards.**

- Paul draws the clearest possible line between the church's responsibility toward those inside the covenant and its posture toward those who have never been part of it, and we have spent two thousand years confusing the two.

1 Corinthians 5:9–11 (ESV)

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

Paul shuts down the idea that holiness means withdrawal from the world. He says: you cannot leave the world, and that is not the assignment.

- The church does not exist to insulate itself from the culture. The church exists to penetrate the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- You cannot evangelize people you refuse to be around. You cannot reach a world you are afraid to touch.

The church has no business being shocked when the world acts like the world. When people who have never submitted to the Lordship of Christ live as if Christ is not Lord — that is not a scandal. That is consistency.

WHAT THE CHURCH CANNOT DO IS ALLOW THE INSIDE OF THE HOUSE TO BECOME INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE OUTSIDE, BECAUSE THE MOMENT THE HOUSE LOSES ITS DISTINCTIVENESS, IT LOSES ITS REDEMPTIVE POWER.

- *We love the world enough to enter it.*
- *We love the world enough to reach it.*

- *We love the world enough to tell it the truth.*
- *We love the world too much to become it.*

Somebody say: *"I am in this world, but I am not of it."*

Now I want to close where Paul opened this entire chapter — not with the man's sin, not with the church's failure — but with the Passover Lamb.

- **Verse seven: "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."**
- That one sentence is the theological ground under everything Paul has said.
- The lamb died so the household would live.
- The blood was applied so the destroyer could not enter.
- You do not pursue holiness in your life and in this church to earn something.
- You pursue it because everything has already been purchased and to live carelessly as if none of it happened is to despise the price that was paid.

THE MOST EVANGELISTIC THING THE CHURCH CAN DO IS BE GENUINELY

DIFFERENT FROM THE WORLD IT IS TRYING TO REACH. A HOSPITAL THAT IS JUST AS SICK AS ITS PATIENTS CANNOT HEAL ANYONE.

For those of you sitting in this room today who have been the person the church needed to confront but nobody had the courage to speak to — I want you to hear this. **Paul's goal was never your condemnation. His goal was your salvation.** The same Spirit that moved Paul to write these words is standing in this room right now, and **He is not extending a finger of accusation. He is extending an arm of invitation.** The Father has not stopped watching the road. He is still looking for the prodigal to come home.

- *It is not too late to come back.*
- *It is not too late to be restored.*
- *It is not too late to let the blood of the Lamb mean something in your life today.*
- *The door is still open. And the Father is still watching the road.*

THE LAMB HAS BEEN SACRIFICED - LIVE LIKE IT.

Come to Jesus. Not because this church is perfect. Not because the people around you have lived without failure. Come to Jesus because He is the Passover Lamb, and His blood is sufficient for everything you have done and everything that has been done to you.

Come to Jesus because the grace He offers is not a grace that looks the other way — it is a grace that looks you in the eye and says, "I know everything about you. I paid for everything about you. And I am not finished with you yet."

- 1. I will not hide what God has already seen. I bring it into the light today.**
- 2. The blood of Jesus is sufficient — not just for my past, but for my present moment.**
- 3. I choose the holiness He purchased. I refuse to live as if the cross did not happen.**