

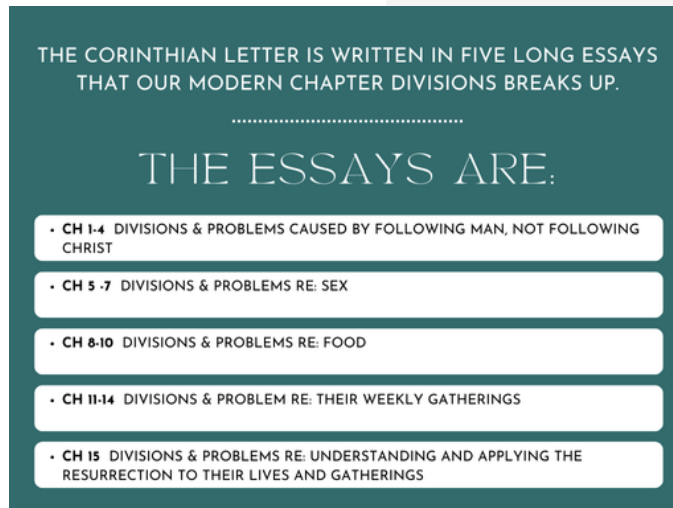
CCLEB SERMON NOTES

SUNDAY JUNE 16, 2024
1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-13

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BIBLICAL SEXUAL ETHICS - HOLY, PRIDE, EVIL

We begin a new section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians today. This is the second of five essays in his letter, and this essay covers chapters 5-7.



The topic of this essay is Problems & Divisions regarding Sexual Practices in the Corinthian Church – an essay on biblical sexual ethics. Today's title is



This is a tough passage. It's hard to read and hard to teach. I wrestled with this for weeks. I have feared that this passage will result in confusion and some feeling condemned. However, this is God's word, from God who loves us and knows what is best for us. Some of this content may be uncomfortable to read and study; however, these are God's inspired words to guide and instruct us in the area of sexual ethics. So I invite you to join me in discovering God's best for us. Let's do this together.

We are going to structure things a little differently during the teaching time today. We are going to first read the whole chapter, then talk about the last verse first.

We will then jump way back into the Old Testament for context and definition, and then, with those lenses, we will bring it all together in **1 Corinthians 5** and hopefully see how this applied to the Corinthian church. We will trust the Holy Spirit to bring application to our lives.

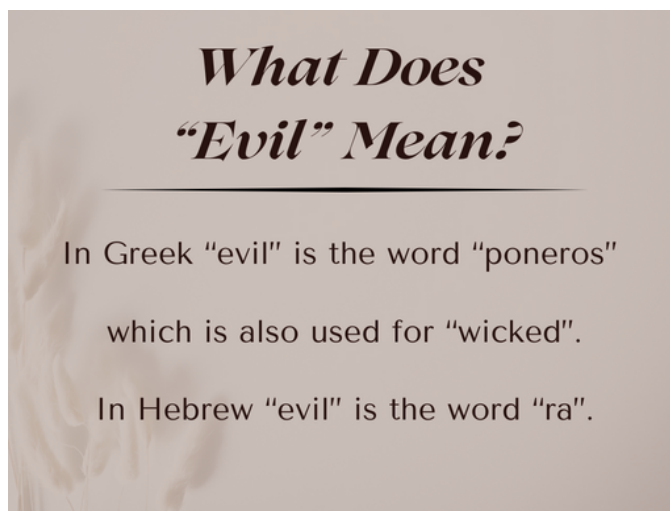
Let's read **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**.

Paul states clearly how he wants the Corinthian church to respond to the defined sexual immorality present in the church, and how to respond to what Paul defines as "evil" participants. This is stated in **verse 13b**: "You must remove the evil person from among you."

Paul made a similar statement at the end of **verse 2b**: "And you should remove this man from your fellowship." In Greek, those two sentences are nearly identical.

That is a very strong response from Paul, and it seems swift and harsh. What happened to Paul being the champion of grace? And why did Paul come to that conclusion?

I believe it has to do, in part, with the word "evil." Let's consider the word "evil."



What does it mean? In Greek, "evil" is the word "poneros" (paun nay rros'), also used for "wicked." In Hebrew, it is the word "ra".

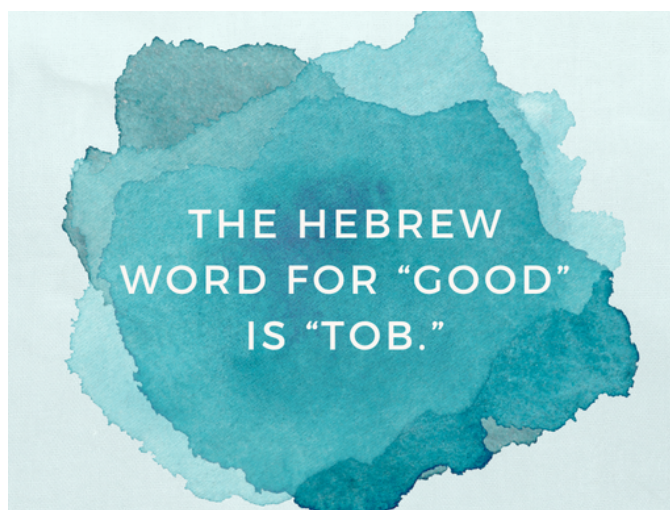
Most commentaries agree that Paul's strong statement in **verses 2** and **13**, "you should remove this man from your fellowship," is an allusion to **Deuteronomy 17:7**. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the end of **Deuteronomy 17:7** is nearly identical to **1 Corinthians 5:13**. If Paul in the first century AD is alluding to **Deuteronomy 17**, which was given around 1400 BC, then we need an ancient Hebrew understanding of the word "evil."

So for just a moment, pretend you don't have an operating definition of "evil" and rather just focus on God's response to evil in **Deuteronomy 17**, "you will purge the evil person from among you." So simply based on God's response to "evil" and those who do it, it's clear that God's directive to the Israelite community regarding how to respond to those who participate in evil is likewise "strong, swift, and harsh," like Paul's response in **1 Corinthians 5**. So whatever "evil" is, it is clear that neither God nor Paul think that "evil" is "okay" for God's community. Which begs the question, what is it about "evil in the community" that generates such a strong response?

To answer that, let's look at the first use of the word "evil" in the Old Testament to help us understand what "evil" is.

As with most foundational concepts, let's go back to Genesis, the very beginning of mankind. **Genesis 2:9**

So, without yet defining what evil is, it is clear from the text that "evil" is separate from "good." The Hebrew word for "good" is "tob"



If "evil" is separate from "good," then if we can understand what "good" is, we can better understand what "evil" is. So then, what is "good"? The word "evil" begins to appear in chapter two of Genesis, whereas the word "good" already appeared seven times in **Genesis 1**. There is that "seven" again that we saw so often in the Gospel of John. The first use of the word "good" was in **Genesis 1:4**. So God the Creator says what He created was "good." And God goes on to repeat that cycle of creating something and calling it "good" seven times in total. Now, prior to "good" happening, **Genesis 1:2** tells us that everything was "formless and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep." This combination of words in ancient Hebrew and surrounding cultures was understood to mean and represent "chaos."



This is Apopis, the ancient Egyptian demon of chaos, who had the form of a serpent and represented all that was outside of the ordered cosmos, and was the symbol of evil. Note also the water symbol above him.

So where there was only "formless and empty and darkness and deep water" – i.e., chaos, that's the starting place in the text according to **verse 2**. Out of that, God created and ordered creation. If you compare the chaos of a pile of Legos to a beautiful Lego house, the difference is that the Lego house has Legos ordered in a way that creates the beautiful structure. In a similar way, that was Genesis 1. God literally created and ordered light, sky, land, vegetation, sun and stars, aquatic creatures, land creatures, and mankind. And then it says in **Genesis 1:31**

Good “tob”, means “functional”, as in whatever God deemed “good” will accomplish exactly what it is intended to accomplish – like a perfectly designed well-oiled machine. Good also includes a sense of “pleasing, satisfying”.

The word “good” in Hebrew, according to the Hebrew linguistic historian Benner, is more like “functional,” as in whatever God deemed “good” will accomplish exactly what it is intended to accomplish – like a perfectly designed, well-oiled machine. But it also includes a sense of “pleasing, satisfying,” so perhaps it means “looks good, sounds good, smells good, feels good” too. So when God looked at His creation and called it “good,” in some ways He was saying, “I have created it and ordered it exactly the way it is supposed to be for it to work – it is pleasing, satisfying – it is ‘good.’”

That is an understanding of “good.” Let’s move on to an understanding of “evil.” Our abstract English word “Evil” in Hebrew is “ra”, and it is not abstract in Hebrew; it is concrete.



This word is hard to define for our Western ears where we see “evil” and “good” as opposites. Eastern minds understand “evil” and “good” to be part of a pairing, like “light and darkness,” “truth and lie,” “good and evil” – a pairing. According to Benner, the verb form of “ra” (evil) is “to separate what was intended to be together,” i.e., to break apart what was ordered. According to Abarim Publications, “evil” is “where fruitful unity is compromised,” meaning it is broken apart and does not produce the expected fruit, resulting in sadness, distress, calamity, and hardship.

So let me give you a biblical working definition of "evil" as I understand it. Note, this is not the only definition of "evil"; it's what I understand currently within the context of Genesis and the Bible. This is a compilation of thoughts from several different authors. "Evil" is that which seeks to drag back into chaos what God has created – ordered, blessed, and called "good". Evil will break apart what was intended to be fruitful, "de-creating it" if you will, "dis-ordering it", and it will result in "formlessness, emptiness, darkness, deep waters" which result in "distress, sadness, calamity, hardship." We see the division, disorder, dysfunction, and darkness that are the results of evil clearly in stories of Adam & Eve, Cain, Joseph's brothers, the Israelites in the wilderness, David, Solomon... so many others.

“Evil” is that which seeks to drag back into chaos what God has created – ordered, blessed and called “good”.



But God didn't want those consequences of evil for the Israelite community – hence he urged them to (**Deuteronomy 17:7b**) “purge the evil from among you”.

And neither did God want those consequences of evil for His Corinthian church. After all, the “gathering” of followers of Jesus, the church, God's church, according to **1 Corinthians 1:2**, was “called by God to be his own holy people” (“Holy” meaning separate from – set apart for). And God equipped them to be fruitful and multiply spiritually in the godless Corinthian culture, which was the Kingdom of “darkness” (**Colossians 1:13**). So, if God called them out of the Kingdom of Darkness (separate from darkness) and called them into the “Kingdom of his dear Son”, He clearly does not want them dragged back into the darkness of chaos by “evil”. Specifically, God doesn't want the Corinthian church, which God designed to be “functional”, a “well-designed, well-oiled machine”, to be “broken apart” by evil – divided, to be “de-created”, “disordered”, “dysfunctional”. God doesn't want the Corinthian church's “fruitfulness to be compromised”. God doesn't want the Corinthian believers as a gathering to experience “formlessness, emptiness, darkness, deep waters, distress, sadness, calamity, hardship”. And neither does God want that for us today as Jesus' church here. Hence, Paul's “strong, swift, harsh” response to learning of this “sexual immorality” that he calls “evil”.

Now, with that ancient understanding of the word “evil,” let's look again at **1 Corinthians 5**.

Verse 1a: “I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you.” So, Paul is now in Ephesus – 300+ miles across the Aegean Sea.



And Paul gets this "report" from Corinth. Paul was in Corinth for 18 months sharing the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the Gospel of the Kingdom. Many Corinthians listened and accepted Paul's message about Jesus, and they collectively became "God's Church" in Corinth. Paul taught them, disciplined them, and worked with them. Then God called Paul to start another work across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus.

Paul is there for a bit. He has already corresponded at least once with the Corinthian church, and then he receives this report mentioned in **verse 1**. And the report is of "sexual immorality." A couple of things to point out before we define what "sexual immorality" is: Note the words "among you" at the end of **verse 1** are the same words "among you" at the end of **verse 13**. This is a "bracketing" at the beginning and end that indicates that Paul's primary concern is for the spiritual health of the church, the gathering, what is happening "among them."

The second thing to note here is that even without defining "sexual immorality" as Paul was using it, we know from the text that whatever is happening with this man and woman in the Corinthian church is "worse" than even what the "pagans" do. So, on a graph of sexual conduct of what God would want from His own people, here is how this might look on this slide



Right, so not only has this man and woman crossed the line, they have crossed two lines and they are beyond that. Remember, God has called His people out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Jesus. So what is expected, and what they were trained and equipped for by Paul's earlier teaching, and equipped by the Spirit of Christ living within them, is that they would demonstrate and live out thinking and behavior that reflects the life, teaching, and words of Jesus—Kingdom thinking, Kingdom living. Instead, in this case, there is behavior that is something that even the pagans don't do. It is implied in the text that even the pagans don't condone this.

The word "sexual immorality" used here by Paul is traditionally translated as "fornication" and it's used to describe "any unacceptable sexual behavior." Now, what is interesting is that both the pagans and Christians use that same general definition of sexual immorality. However, as you would expect, the pagans and the Christians define "unacceptable" differently.

What we learn from **verse 1** is that a man is involved in a sexual relationship with his mother-in-law. With integrity to the original, the Greek doesn't say "living in sin"; it simply says "the man has his father's wife," but the context fills in the rest, and the verb "has" in Greek is routinely used to imply sex.

So if something is socially deemed as "unacceptable", meaning a line has been crossed, you would then expect there to be **a response** from the governing community. The commentator Keener says that "parent-child incest was universally abhorred within the Roman Empire" and generally viewed as "terrible". Relations with stepmothers were treated in Roman culture as "incestuous". The response from the Roman legal system to crossing this line of "unacceptable sexual behavior" was banishment to a prisoner island. Even the secular pagans abhorred this practice.

Let's look at another response to unacceptable sexual behavior. The Jewish legal system's response to "unacceptable sexual behavior" was based on their fear of God's law. **Leviticus 18:8, 29**

The theme of both of these legal community responses is "exile," banishment, being cast out - which is what we see Paul reinforcing in **1 Corinthians 5:2b**, "You should remove this man from your fellowship," and **verse 13b**, "You must remove the evil person from among you." To be "shunned," "cut off," "cast out," or "removed" from a community is a form of death.

At this point in the narrative, the response of the Corinthian church, not Roman, not Jewish, to what Paul labels as "evil" and "sexual immorality" is quite different than how both the Romans and Jewish communities would respond. What we see in Corinth is the church practicing "tolerance" and at the same time "displaying spiritual pride". That's what Paul addresses in **verse 2**. The Greek word used as "proud" is more literally translated "puffed up" or "self-inflated". The narrative, including **verse 6**, seems to imply that they were "proud" of their tolerance of this evil behavior.

Where they are "tolerant" and "self-inflated" spiritually as a community of believers, Paul says there should be "mourning in sorrow and shame". To Paul, their response is contradictory. How can you have this evil among you and be spiritually proud? What Paul is looking for here is a Kingdom response to this sin, that is for the church to collectively be "repentant and broken". And this would be evidenced by genuine "mourning in sorrow and shame", tears. Repentance is a change of mind and heart (Metanoia) that results in a change of behavior. So at the end of **verse 2**, Paul wasn't just looking for mourning in sorrow and shame; he was then looking sequentially for "repentance and brokenness" to result in the action of change.

The principle here is that true brokenness and repentance result in actions that bring about change. It's not just verbal confession; that's the starting point. Repentance involves actions that lead to change. Verbal confessions without making changes wear people out, and they eventually end up thinking, "show me, don't tell me."

Before we move on, I want to comment on the connection between "evil and pride". Almost always where you find "evil" you will find "pride" - "self-inflation", and vice versa. **James 3:16** warns us. Pride is the dog bone of the enemy. If there is pride in your life, he is coming after it to exploit it. He will take that pride and it will result in evil and all its consequences.

So the action in response to their collective mourning that Paul is now expecting from them is for them "to remove the evil person from among" them, and he describes how that should happen in **verses 3-5**.

You can imagine that handing out this level of church discipline would be difficult - which is why Paul assures them in **verse 3** that even though he is not with them physically, he is "with them in Spirit". This is not a "supernatural act of Paul's body being in Ephesus and his spirit being in Corinth" separate from his body. Rather, according to Keener in secular literature, "with you in Spirit" is merely a statement of intimacy. For Christians, though, who all have God's Spirit in them, this may also be a statement that they are unified on the course of action necessary.

Paul continues in **verse 3** that he has already passed judgment on this man. This is an expression of Paul's apostolic authority. He has the power and authority in the name of the Lord Jesus to exercise this level of discipline to protect the flock that Jesus entrusted to him, the Corinthian church, and to protect them from the consequences of evil.

For clarity's sake, the consequences of evil that Paul wants the Corinthian church to avoid are: **division**, "**de**-creation," "**dis**order," and "**dys**function." Paul doesn't want the Corinthian church's "fruitfulness to be compromised" by evil. He doesn't want the Corinthian believers as a gathering to experience "formlessness, emptiness, darkness, deep waters," which bring distress, sadness, calamity, and hardship.



So in **verse 4**, Paul gives them clear instruction on how to do this. It starts with a "church meeting" - note that it's public - how terrifying! Remember, this is a very community-centered society, and they are putting this man out of the church community - in essence making him "dead to them". So it has to be public - everyone participating. Because this is in the early days of the church, there is no other church community in Corinth; there is only one church, hence banishment had more of a potential to work. Today, according to commentator Guzik, this approach rarely works because an unrepentant person who is asked to leave one church often simply finds another church and then complains about being a victim of injustice.

We also see in **verse 4** Paul reminding them that this removal of the man is happening under Paul's authority by the power of the Lord Jesus. This is an application of **1 Corinthians 4:20**. Then in **verse 5**, Paul describes the removal of the man from among them in an interesting way. He says, "hand him over to Satan..." What does that mean?

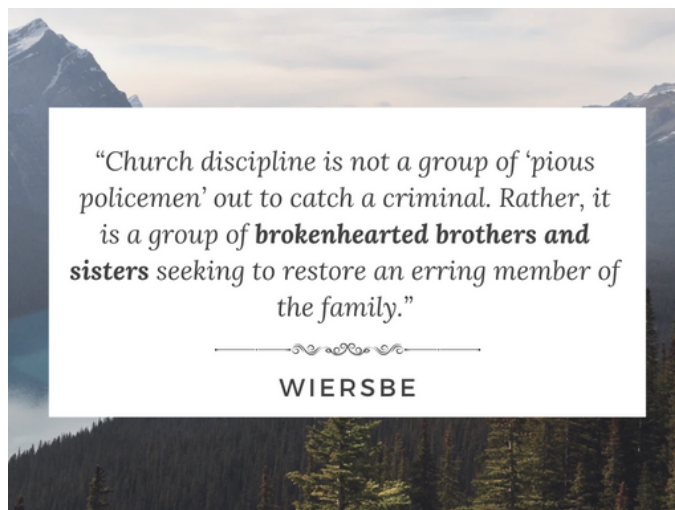
Go back to our graph of conduct. This man is part of the "church", the community of believers in Corinth called out of the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of Jesus. This man's unrepentant incestuous behavior with his mother-in-law is such that Paul says to the church, "put him back on the other side of the line where Satan rules."



Well, what did Paul hope that would accomplish in Corinth? First, to protect the body of believers from the consequences of evil in their church community. Second, Paul says in verse 5b that what it will hopefully accomplish in the man is that "...his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns." Out from under the spiritual protection and love of the church and Christian community, there is a significantly increased likelihood that his flesh, which is driving his sinful behavior, would be destroyed. Then he would repent. Paul's goal for the man, of course, is repentance and restoration - this was intended to be a redemptive act.

Now, regarding the unclear and confusing statement "... he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns." The church can neither give nor take away salvation. Jesus alone saves - that is His name. Thus, the most likely thing this statement means is that the man will be restored and living among the "saved", meaning through repentance he is restored and in community with the believers, the "saved".

The goal of church discipline should always be repentance and restoration - a redemptive act.



Wiersbe said, "Church discipline is not a group of 'pious policemen' out to catch a criminal. Rather, it is a group of brokenhearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore an erring member of the family."

In my whole life as a pastor's kid in many, many churches, I have only seen this form of church discipline practiced twice. The discipline was only given after the church leadership confronted the individual in love and brokenness several times, pleaded for repentance that involved change several times, and had attempted other forms of discipline. One person repented and was restored and is now a godly individual who serves the Lord with zeal. Sadly, the other is not. Please know that we as God's church are called to practice all of God's instruction regarding handling these things, which includes **Galatians 6:1-3**, which is Paul's own writings from over two years prior to this letter. Thus, this form of church discipline that Paul urges in **1 Corinthians 5** is the last step of many taken in pursuing repentance and restoration.

Now having given instruction to the Corinthian church regarding how to handle the man individually, Paul's letter then returns to focusing on the spiritual health and functioning of the church that this incident of incest revealed. Note here, the rest of **chapter 5** and **Chapter 6:1-11** are probably not separate topics as sometimes taught; rather, they are most likely discussions relevant to Paul's argument for the spiritual health of the Corinthian Church related to sexual ethics - specifically how to apply the gospel to the problem that arose in Corinth.

Paul has already confronted the church for being proud when they should have been "mourning and sorrowful". Now, in **verses 6-8**, he gives them an analogy of "yeast and dough" to illustrate how extensively this "pride" and "evil" has affected the church. Paul compares it to "a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough." If you have ever made bread or observed the process, you know that adding yeast or leaven causes the bread to rise or become "puffed up". In ancient times, yeast was often added by using a piece of old dough to activate the new. Remarkably, only a small amount of old dough is needed to leaven the new batch.

Paul suggests that their pride and evil behavior are similar. They must not allow even a pinch of the old ways from the kingdom of darkness into the church, because such evil can spread throughout the entire congregation.

While the specific instance of incest in Corinth may involve only one man and woman initially, the potential for evil to spread is significant. Without practicing and upholding biblical sexual ethics, all ethical boundaries could be compromised, rationalized, and justified. This breakdown could lead the gathering of believers, the Corinthian Church, into a state of disorder, dysfunction, and compromised fruitfulness. Imagine the challenges of gathering at the communion table under such conditions.

Paul continues in **verses 7-8** by urging the church to remove the old yeast, which aligns with the theme of banishment or removal discussed earlier. He uses the analogy of yeast in the context of Passover, where the Israelites would begin a new batch of dough without adding any old dough (yeast) from the previous batch. This practice ensured that the bread would remain unleavened, meaning it would not rise or become "puffed up".

Paul's desire is for the church to be like this unleavened bread. Christ is our Passover Lamb, sacrificed for us. His sacrifice signifies a new beginning for believers, symbolized by the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. This means living without the "old yeast" of pride, wickedness, and evil, and instead living in the sincerity and truth that Jesus exemplifies.

These two powerful guides—sincerity and truth—are what Paul encourages the Corinthian church to embody as they strive to live out their faith and maintain purity in their community.

Now, as we move on to **verses 9-11**, Paul addresses a related issue that arose from a previous letter. This indicates there was at least one other correspondence before what we now call 1 Corinthians. Apparently, in this prior letter, Paul's instructions regarding associating with people indulging in sexual immorality were misunderstood. The confusion was about whether this applied to all people engaging in sexual immorality, both Christians and non-Christians alike.

Paul clarifies that his instruction was not about isolating oneself from people in the kingdom of darkness. It's expected that those without God in their lives will act ungodly. Rather, Paul's point was specifically about not associating closely—literally, not "mixing up together"—with Christians who are engaged in sexual immorality.

The Greek word translated here as "associate" carries the sense of mixing or blending together, akin to the idea of mixing up "new dough". In this analogy, Paul advises against mixing the old yeast of the kingdom of darkness with the unleavened dough of the new Kingdom in Christ.

But what is interesting here is that Paul then lists many other sins/evils that the church needs to be careful about as well. The Corinthian church was not to associate with believers indulging in sexual sin, as well as not to associate with believers who are "greedy", or "worshipping idols", or are "abusive", or are "drunks", or "cheaters".

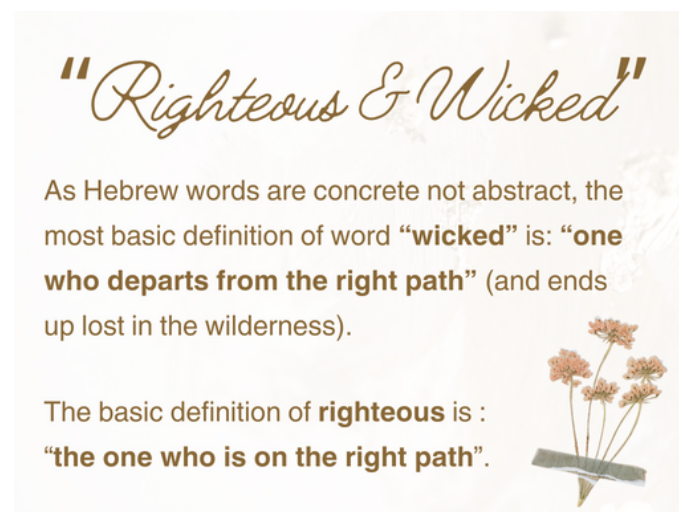


All of those are likewise evil and destructive, and have consequences in the church—dividing, disordering, and potentially causing dysfunction. Paul says not even to eat with such people because of the risk of the old yeast of the kingdom of darkness permeating the new. But according to **Galatians 6:1-3**, are we not to help other believers who are in sin? Yes, the criteria, though, is "godly people helping a struggling believer back onto the right track". Mentoring, disciplining a struggling believer is not "living with them," "mixing it up with them" as they practice evil.

Paul ends this section in **verses 12-13** by summarizing the church's responsibility for their own flock and clarifying that they should not judge unbelievers. He emphasizes the serious action needed in response to the incestuous sin and evil.

Let me close with a few thoughts for your meditation and prayer.

1. There is another pairing of Hebrew words - the words "righteous and wicked". Again, as Hebrew words are concrete, the most basic definition of the word "wicked" is: "one who departs from the right path" and ends up lost in the wilderness. The basic definition of "righteous" is: "the one who is on the right path". How do you know what the right path is? It's the one Jesus leads on **Psalms 23:3b**, "he guides me along right paths".



Biblical sexual ethics exist for believers because believers are men and women who are part of what God "created and ordered". If we do not follow biblical sexual ethics, we are dragged back into chaos, disorder, and dysfunction, as in the beginning when there was "formlessness, emptiness, darkness, and deep waters". To avoid chaos, we are called to stay on the right path - God's word.

2. Jesus knew that "evil" practiced among disciples - believers - was going to be an issue. In the prayer Jesus gave the disciples, teaching them how to pray in Mt 6:9-13 (highlight "rescue us from the evil one"), known as "The Lord's Prayer," he prays in vs 13 "rescue us from the evil one".

Jesus clearly gives us all we need to fight against evil that wants to drag us back into chaos, and those two practices are prayer and following the Good Book.

SUPPLEMENTAL

NOTES:

- **1. More on "Good and bad":** <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/studies-words/good-and-bad.htm>
- **"Evil" in Hebrew is "ra".** "Ra" is also the name of the Egyptian sun god, the principal deity in the Egyptian pantheon, worshipped as both the creator of the universe and the giver of life and order. This connection seems more than just a linguistic coincidence, especially considering that those who first heard the book of Genesis from Moses had just spent 430 years living in slavery in Egypt.
- **More on "Abstract" and "concrete" words:** Greek and English use abstract words like evil, wicked, righteous, compassion. Hebrew has no abstract words; only concrete words based on an original pictographic language. It pays to dive into a mechanical translation of Hebrew to understand word meanings in a concrete way. For example, see the link below.

<https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/definition/righteous.htm>
- **God applauds Job for shunning evil.** From a place of God's great love and wisdom, it makes sense why God would applaud Job for "shunning evil". In Job 1:8 (NIV), Job knew and understood that "evil" would drag his life into chaos—the void, darkness. God didn't want that for Job, of course not. He loved Job.
- **1 Corinthians 5:2 ..."shame".** The Greek does not include "shame", only "mourning and sorrow". I don't like that the NLT included "shame" being a spiritual response in their translation.. I think "shame" drives the wrong behavior, like isolation, and hiding, running.. which is form of "self-exile", "self-banishment" if you will. And those shame driven behaviors doesn't usually produce the change that is harmonious with the gospel and Kingdom.