

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

The Problem and the Power of Infiltration

(1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

Study #6

Introduction: Bugs and such...

Here in South Texas, especially in the summer - and for comfort's sake - it's important to keep our houses and apartments air-tight. We don't want hot air to infiltrate.

For cleanliness' sake, we try to keep things bug-tight. We don't want mosquitos, flies, and other creepier things to infiltrate.

Infiltration, generally, is a problem. Hospitals don't want germs to infiltrate operating rooms. The US State Department doesn't want spies to infiltrate the government.

This morning, and without using the word, the Apostle Paul wants us to know that the infiltration of some things into the church is a very big problem.

He then surprises us by calling us to be Jesus' powerful and loving infiltrators.

Review...

Over the last four Sundays, we have focused on the issue of

unity of the body of Christ. The next few Sundays are concerned with **purity** in the church. And this section begins with a bang.

Paul launched into this new theme with no easy transitions to address something in the church in Corinth that just wasn't right.

The Problem of the Infiltration of Sin into Jesus' Church (5:1-8)

One Man's Sin (5:1)

A report of sexual sin (v. 1a)

[1] It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality¹ among you...

When we started this study of 1 Corinthians a few weeks ago, I filled you in on some details about the city in which the church was located. Corinthian culture was exceedingly immoral.

In the first century world, to live as "*a Corinthian*" meant that you lived in sexual excess.²

The temple of the goddess, Aphrodite,³ in Corinth was unique in all of Greece in that it had a thousand female priests who were, essentially, religious prostitutes.

Given that culture, it isn't surprising that problems involving sex surfaced in the church. Nor are we surprised that Paul addressed sexual issues in this letter.

If you aren't all that familiar with the Bible, you might not expect that you would read about sexual stuff here. But the Bible's writers address sex frequently.

¹ Immorality (*πορνεία / porneia*) can refer to prostitution but generally referred to any sexual sin.

² When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression, "*Corinthian girl*." The Greek word (coined by Aristophanes) "*korinthiazomai*" means "to fornicate."

³ Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, was also associated with beauty, fertility, and physical pleasure.

One whole book in the Bible is dedicated to the theme of the beauty of sexual intimacy in marriage. (The Song of Solomon) Proverbs has lots to say about sex, both warning about its misuse and affirming its proper use within marriage.

We read much of what Paul says about sexuality in this letter, as we will discover in the weeks ahead.

Paul hadn't heard about moral problems in the church at Corinth from the church. He heard it through the grapevine.⁴

And Paul didn't name names. He didn't have to. Everybody knew who he was talking about. But he does name the sin.

The outrageous sin, named (v. 1b)

[1b]...and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.⁵

Yes, a man in the church was sexually involved with his stepmother.⁶

We aren't surprised to learn that this sort of behavior was forbidden in the Old Testament.⁷ What may surprise us is that even the Corinthians consider it beyond the pale.

We don't know particulars and we don't need to.⁸ We know enough to know that what was happening was wrong.

We can assume that the woman involved was not a part of the Corinthian church. However, the man was, which means that Paul has something to say about him.

⁴ The rumor mill worked as well then as it does now, even without social media.

⁵ This would be an extreme case of the consistently carnal Christian that Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

⁶ ***"His father's wife"*** almost certainly doesn't mean "his mother" or Paul would have said so.

⁷ See Leviticus 18:8. Stoning was the punishment for this crime.

⁸ For instance, we don't know if the woman was presently married to the man's father, if she was divorced from his father, or if she was his father's widow.

First, though, he spoke to the church.

The Church's Response (5:2)

Unacceptable arrogance (v. 2a)

[2a] You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead...

That a man in their church was involved in such a thing should have prompted mourning. In Corinth, it prompted pride.

Maybe they were proud of how accepting or how open-minded they were, or even how they weren't all hung up about rules and such.

Paul said, *"No, you should be mourning."* And there was plenty to mourn here:

Mourn for a brother who had fallen into sin.

Mourn for the evil that had infiltrated the church.

Mourn for the loss of a good witness to the city.

But beyond mourning, Paul called for action.

Necessary removal (v. 2b)

[2b]...so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.⁹

Political leaders will often use the term "a red line" to say that if someone does "x" they have done something that demands hard consequences.

This Corinthian man had crossed a red line. The consequences will be severe. Paul didn't call for reproof or a strong scolding. Like a surgeon treating a tumor, he called for removal.

Paul has already told us that the ***"body of Christ"*** is the temple of God, the dwelling place of God. (1 Corinthians 3:16) This man was

⁹ In 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul refers to Christians who lead ***"disorderly"*** lives, urging that fellow Christians should not associate with them. Tragically, it is the case that some ***"brothers"*** will not lead Jesus-centered lives.

corrupting God's temple by his presence. The reputation of the faith community was compromised by his presence.

Paul's call for removal wasn't cold-hearted or over-the-top. It was perfectly appropriate given the enormity of the sin.

It might have taken the church some time to process Paul's command as they heard his instructions read out loud. While they processed, he took unilateral, apostolic action.

Paul's Action (5:3-5)

Paul's authority to judge (v. 3)

[3] For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

Paul was in the city of Ephesus when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians. He was "**absent in body.**" But, as an apostle of Jesus, he had authority to impose judgment long-distance. Paul was physically absent, but he was "**present in spirit.**"

So, from a distance, he told the church to call a meeting at which he would be *spiritually*, but not *physically*, present.

Paul's authority to command (vv. 4-5)

Paul commanded that the church should call a meeting
(v. 4)

[4] In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus...

It's important that we know that there is more going on when Christians gather than Christians gathering.

When these Corinthian Christians gathered, the power of the Lord Jesus would be there. That is always the case when believers in Jesus gather to carry out the business of the church, whether it's worship, instruction, fellowship, service, or, as here, discipline.

By the time this meeting has taken place, Paul will have already taken action. His action was a judgment that the church should have imposed, but didn't.

Paul turned the man over to Satan (v. 5)

[5] I have decided¹⁰ to turn such a person over to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord Jesus.

That is a mouthful. What does it mean?

In part, that's Paul simply making official what he had just told the church that they should have already done: Remove the man from the church. (v. 3)

This is a saved man. We know that because as the passage unfolds, Paul contrasted him with "**the people of the world.**" (that is, with unbelievers; v. 10)

He wrote, ***[12] For what business of mine is it to judge outsiders?***, (meaning that this man was an "*insider*", a *believer*) and then ***[13] But those who are outside, God judges.*** - NOT the church.

Up to this point, this Christian man has enjoyed the fellowship of the church while flagrantly pursuing sexual immorality.

He thinks he can have it both ways. Paul says, "*No, you can't.*"

At the meeting in Corinth, the church will follow Paul's lead and will deliver this man out of the realm of church. He'll be unwelcomed for fellowship and community, worship services, potlucks, prayer meetings, and Bible studies.

This action delivers him into the realm of Satan, whom Paul calls in 2 Corinthians, ***[4:4] the god of this world.***

And for what purpose did Paul deliver this man over to Satan?

¹⁰ Paul has made this decision on his own - which doesn't mean that it is not a spiritually considered decision.

Well, there are lots of ways to understand what Paul means here. And rather than list them all, I'll tell you what I think Paul is saying.¹¹ This is a hard saying and I might be wrong, but this is what I think he's saying.

First, he is calling on God to use Satan as a tool in this man's life, and that is something we see repeatedly in Scripture.

The Old Testament patriarch, Job, suffered because God gave Satan authority to afflict Job, which - eventually - grew and improved Job's faith.

The Apostle Paul himself was afflicted with a **"thorn in the flesh,"** a physical problem of some sort that he described as **"a messenger from Satan."** (2 Corinthians 12:7) This **"thorn"** drove Paul to greater dependence on God and His grace.

Paul used the same terminology when referring to two men, Alexander and Hymenaeus. Paul wrote, **[1 Timothy 1:20]...I have handed [them] over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme."**

In that case, the purpose was clearly remedial. It was to drive these two guys to repentance.

But, second, it is not clear to me that Satan's role in this Corinthian man's life was remedial.

Paul wrote that he had handed this man over to Satan **"for the destruction of his body."**

That seems to me to be a clear reference to the man's death. He is a believer in Jesus. He has been delivered into the realm of Satan,

¹¹ In addition to what I understand Paul to be saying, here are at least three other possible interpretations of Paul's action: #1 - Turn him over to Satan for discipline in order that through this discipline he might be humbled and repent of his sins and be saved (delivered in some sense) at the day of the Lord. #2 - The thing "saved" is the corporate body of believers. The church will be saved from a ruined witness before a watching world. The spirit to be saved is not that of the offender, but the corporate life of the church. #3 - The salvation in view equals a rich inheritance in the kingdom IF the individual responds to this destruction of his sinful ways by repenting.

who hates God and those who believe in Jesus. God will give Satan authority to take his life.¹²

Third, this man will be delivered directly out of this life into the realm of the redeemed, **"so that [at least] his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."**

When Jesus examines this man's works at His Judgment Seat (the Bema), his works will be burned up while **[1 Corinthians 3:15] he himself will be saved, yet only so as through fire.**

Paul took this very strong action which effectively delivered the man directly to glory. And Paul did it out of deep concern for the health of the church.

Leaven Removal (5:6-8)

The danger of a little leaven (v. 6)

[6] Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?¹³

Paul takes us into the kitchen to discuss leaven. Often in Scripture, leaven (or yeast) is a symbol for a *negative* infiltrating force. It's code for "sin."

This man we've been talking about WAS leaven in the Corinthian church. His presence threatened to pollute the whole lump.

Bakers know that it doesn't take much leaven to leaven a whole lump of dough. That's why leaven is such a good symbol for sin. It doesn't take much high-handed, unrepented of, in your face sin to poison a whole church.

¹² This gives **"destruction"** (*olethros*) its normal sense of total ruin and **"flesh"** (*sarx*) its normal sense of the physical body. That God is willing to bring about the physical deaths of His people (whether by using Satan or not) is clear from the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and from Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 11 that some in Corinth are "asleep" (a euphemism for death because they took part in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

¹³ Same words found in Galatians 5:9.

So, just like cutting out a tumor is often the best way to deal with a cancer, the leaven of sin must be cleaned out, which drives Paul to give us another word picture.

We are unleavened - live like it! (vv. 7-8)

We ARE an unleavened lump! (v. 7)

[7] Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

He has us thinking about the Jewish custom of house cleaning just prior to the annual Jewish observance of Passover.

At the original Passover, when God redeemed His people from Egypt, the Jews ate unleavened bread because they didn't have time to *leaven* their dough due to their quick flight from the Egyptians.

So, every year, at the Passover feast, the Jews relived - and still do - that event right down to the detail of removing leaven from the house, just like it was when their ancestors escaped Egypt.

Their leaven-free homes were a symbol of having rid themselves of the sins of Egypt.

Note the chronology. Paul says...
 ...the Corinthians ARE UNLEAVENED.
 ...the leaven of sin HAS ALREADY BEEN REMOVED.
 ...Christ, our Passover HAS BEEN SACRIFICED.
 ...we HAVE ESCAPED the judgment of God.

So now, if the leaven of sin resurfaces in the church it is because it has been invited back in. It was time for that leaven (that man) to be gone.

Corinthian Christians in the church who were seeking to lead Jesus-centered lives regularly engaged in leaven removal.

As they became aware of their own bad attitudes or bad actions, they would remove those leavens by confession and by repentance.

But this man showed by his steady disobedience that he wasn't willing to change. And, since he wasn't willing to remove the leaven from his life, he - the leaven - would be removed from the church.

How important is the purity of Jesus' church? So important that someone might be removed, delivered over to Satan, to protect it.

Paul concludes this section with an invitation to the pursuit of that purity.

Live like an unleavened lump (v. 8)

[8] Therefore let's celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

That is the whole Christian life viewed as a feast at which we eat unleavened bread. If there is leaven in our lives, it is to be removed.

Now here is a secret that isn't at all a secret. All of us here today have leaven in our lives. None of us have arrived at perfection. All of us strive against sin, fight a battle to not sin, look for ways to root out sin.

And we all need help in leaven removal.

Actually, we need help with all kinds of things.

I need help with tech stuff, so I turn to Rick Clayworth or Bob Robison or Charlie or any of the teens in the church to help me.

We need help in maintaining health, so we go to our doctor, or we do our own research, or we find a fitness coach.

Same thing with finances, home improvement tasks, car care, or cooking. We need help.

It is no surprise that we would need help when it comes to removing leaven.

This is one of the major reasons why God created Jesus' church: So that we could help each other in leaven removal.

Of course, we are each to be leading a reflective life, and are to regularly ask God to reveal "leaven" in our lives as King David did.

In Psalm 139, David prayed,
***[Psalm 139:23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
 Put me to the test and know my anxious thoughts;
 [24] And see if there is any hurtful way in me,
 And lead me in the everlasting way.***

But I may have "*anxious thoughts*" (which often indicate a need for growth in faith) and "*hurtful ways*" (which can point to a lack of a lack of love) that my reflective prayers won't reveal.

That's why it is so important that I - and that you - be involved in Christian community. We need to have friends and, ideally, to be a part of a group where we are with others who are on the same Jesus-following journey we're on.

These friends can know us, see us as we really are, and can help us identify things that we might not ever see in ourselves that need to be removed.

We each need supportive brothers and sisters who will pray for us and engage with us and help us pull the thorns of selfishness, greed, sexual sin, gossip, complaining, and more.

If that kind of loving, supportive connection with friends in Jesus is not your current reality, let me encourage you to seek it out.

One great place to start would be to visit either of the Adult Bible Fellowships that meet on Sunday mornings. Just show up at 9:30 or 11:00, interact, and develop friends.

Or you could give me a call, and I'd be happy to talk with you about the small groups that are available here at church that meet mid-week for Bible study, prayer, and connection.

If that man in Corinth had friends who could have guided him to leaven removal, the extreme judgment Paul prayed for, and that God imposed might not have ever happened.

In this first section of our passage, Paul has told us how to deal with sin in the church. Stop its infiltration. But what are we to do with the sinfulness that is all around us and that is NOT in the church?

That is what Paul addresses next. And again, the answer involves infiltration.

The Power of the Infiltration of Christians into the World (5:9-13)

Interaction with Outside Sinners is A-OK (5:9-10)

The instruction of Paul's previous letter

Paul mentions a previous correspondence, a letter he had written to the Corinthian church to which we don't now have access.¹⁴

[9] I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people;

That was good advice.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the Corinthians totally misunderstood Paul, and thoroughly mis-applied his words. So Paul now sets them straight about what he meant by what he wrote.

The Corinthians misunderstanding of that letter

¹⁴ Evidently this was a letter with which the Corinthians were all familiar. They may have written him something to which he responded. Or, perhaps, having left after having been with them for eighteen months, he knew them well enough to know what they would need and initiated this letter to them. There may have been a lot of other letters Paul wrote to individuals and to churches which we don't have today. That's OK. What we do have are the letters the Holy Spirit wanted us to have. In that previous letter, Paul had given them some instruction.

¹⁵ Later in 1 Corinthians he virtually repeats that advice with this proverb, ***[1 Corinthians 15:33] Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."***

[10] I did not at all mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the greedy and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to leave the world.

The list of sins here is interesting, but it's obviously only a "for instance" kind of list. The possibilities for sinfulness are way more numerous than what Paul mentions here.

Not that saved people don't commit these and other sins, but unsaved people are in view here. Paul makes that clear when he refers to "***people of this world.***"

His point is that it is perfectly all right for Christians to hang with unsaved people, regardless of lifestyles. So, if section one of our passage contained truth we need to hear, so does section two.

Paul was no fan of Christian monasticism or separatism. He wanted Christians to be in circulation.

Earlier I told you that the infiltrating force of leaven is almost always used in the Bible in a negative sense. "Almost." Not always.

There is at least one time when leaven is referred to as a symbol of a **good** infiltrating force.

In Luke 13 (and Matthew 13), Jesus told a parable about the Kingdom of God.

He said, ***[Luke 13:21] "[The kingdom of God] is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three sata of meal until it was all leavened."***¹⁶

Jesus' comment gets me to thinking about the leavening impact of Christians who remain in circulation in their worlds, who infiltrate society.

¹⁶ The parable is provocative. It speaks to growth of the kingdom through the ages. It speaks of the secret advance of the kingdom because you can't really see leaven at work, and you can't really see the kingdom advancing. There is something there about the subversive influence of the Gospel in a society.

Our church believes in this kind of infiltration.

That's why we have a Benevolence Fund and a Food Pantry, an Afghan Refugee Fund, and an Immigrant Ministry. We look for ways to meet people's needs in Jesus' Name, thereby opening hearts to Jesus.

We offer an ESL ministry that welcomes anyone who wants to learn English, and Jennifer Robison and her team serve them in Jesus' Name.

We open up our building for groups to meet throughout the week that help with issues of recovery.

We're planning to host another "Trunk-or-Treat" event as a wholesome event for neighborhood families in the Halloween season for the same reason.

Christians committed to infiltration may also...

- ...hang out with friends after work and pour the salt of the Gospel on hungry hearts, creating a thirst.
- ...view work time as opportunity time to serve the company AND to shine for Jesus.
- ...buddy up with classmates to study and don't hide their light under a bushel.
- ...play sports or coach sports, join a running group, form a bridge club or a kids play group or a mom's group or a dinner group.

But they are "out there." Christians who are in circulation are "leavening" their worlds for Jesus. And that is what Paul wants you and me to do.¹⁷

He doesn't want us to live in a Christian bubble. That's to commit the error of the Corinthian church.

Of course, it would be impossible for us "***to go out of the world***" in the absolute sense.

¹⁷ Jesus ate with tax-gatherers and sinners, and Paul said it was a fine thing to accept invitations to eat in non-believers' homes (1 Corinthians 10:27).

But, in Corinth in Paul's day and in San Antonio, today it is possible that we might arrange our schedules so as to see as little of the unbelieving world as possible.

That - according to Paul - would be wrong.

We have the gift that our world most desperately needs - the message that LIFE is only found in a trusting relationship with Jesus.

And we can most meaningfully give that gift when we are loving infiltrators.

So, Paul calls us to loving engagement with people who are far from God, regardless of their lifestyles.

Does that surprise you, especially given that he has called us to remove this one guy who was sinning from the church and have nothing to do with him?

Doesn't it seem that a close association with immoral people of the world would be more dangerous than an association with immoral people who belong to the church.

Not according to Paul.

Interaction with Unrepentant Insider Sinners is NOT OK (5:11)

[11] But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is a sexually immoral person, or a greedy person, or an idolater, or is verbally abusive, or habitually drunk, or a swindler - not even to eat with such a person.

Note: Paul's description of the brother here is better translated "named" than "so-called." The text does not even hint at the possibility that he was not a Christian. As we have already seen, he is contrasted with the non-believers of Corinth (v. 2) and with those outside the church (v. 12) To be "named" something is NOT to say that the thing named is different than what it is named. It is to name it correctly.

It is far more dangerous to hang with a believing who is rebellious than with an unbelieving person who is caught up in sin of whatever kind.

A healthy Christian can be a purifying leavening influential infiltrator to a world in need; a rebellious Christian will be an unhealthy leavening influence in the church.

The key takeaways from this morning's passage are to pursue purity in the church for all we're worth AND to broaden our relational reach to include people who are far from God.

At some point in the past, someone had a reach that included you and me. Now, let's do the same for someone else.