1 Corinthians 5:1

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators, yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then ye must needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner — with such an one know not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

The Flesh Brought Into Judgment

This is a very serious matter, and one might have thought it would be dealt with in chapter one — or if not there, at least by chapter two. And yet there were many things first. So many things were brought out about the flesh. There was an energy of the flesh that was dealt with — the flesh that judges God's servants was addressed, and other manifestations of the flesh were brought under the judgment of God through the apostle. Here in chapter five, the lust of the flesh is brought into judgment, and it is to be excluded from among God's people.

The Enemy's Tactic: Delay

One of the enemy's favourite tactics is to delay judgment. There was nothing in chapters 1, 2, 3, or 4 that was intended to delay what we read in chapter five. It may have been necessary to receive those chapters first — to understand the flesh and its character as set forth there — but there is nothing in them of those delaying tactics so frequently found when some evil needs to be judged, and someone says, 'Yes, but first we ought to attend to some other matters.' If something is delayed long enough, perhaps it will be forgotten and never have to be dealt with at all.

Everything in the first four chapters, rightly received, gives force and momentum to what we read in chapter five. Far from delaying it, those chapters build toward it. Every form of fleshly energy exposed in them finds its most serious expression here.

Judging in Context

Chapter 4, verse 5 says: *Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come.* It has been well said that a text taken out of context is a pretext. Some use

this verse because they simply do not want to face the responsibility of having to judge. Yet the Lord Jesus also said, *Judge righteous judgment.* How do we reconcile the two?

The context of 'judge nothing before the time' has everything to do with things that are not yet manifest — the hidden things of darkness, the counsels of the heart. There is no plaque on a person's heart displaying its counsels for all to read. The assembly cannot judge an evil that has not been made manifest; it may be going on and producing a distressing influence, and yet no finger can be put upon the precise source. But the Lord can bring such things to light in His own time.

In 1 Corinthians 5, however, we have something which has been made manifest. The assembly is not dealing with hidden motives, but with conduct that has manifested itself openly. Where a thing is of a leavening character and has become known, the assembly must address it. That is an altogether different matter.

A New Order, But the Same Flesh

One might suppose that with a new order having been brought in — the assembly, which is the sphere where God's administrative government is now to be found — the flesh might be expected to behave differently. But the flesh is the same in every age and under every dispensation of God. In His grace, the flesh is unalterable. It manifests itself in the assembly just as it did under every prior arrangement.

And here we find a judicial sentence brought against it. The sentence was not fully carried out in the event — grace came in, and the man proved to be one of the Lord's by his subsequent repentance. But as far as the sentence went, a judicial act of discipline is not incompatible with salvation. These are God's thoughts concerning the flesh.

What Is Commonly Reported

The particular sin named in our chapter is the kind of sin a man would hide and would not publish. There are some sins men boast of willingly, but not this one. If the chapter had begun, *It is reported commonly that there is someone hiding the sin of fornication among you,* the result would be exactly the same — because the hiding simply did not work. If you know about it and I know about it, then the hiding was no hiding at all.

What a shame that it should have been commonly reported that there was such a sin amongst the children of God. Everything ever heard of the city of Corinth in ancient times speaks of a reputation for unbridled moral evil. For an assembly of Christians in that city to have such a report — how horrible a shame. Instead of being a testimony to holiness in the very city notorious for the opposite, those outside were saying, 'Those Christians — they do the same things as we do.'

Mr. Darby's translation renders it, *It is universally reported that there is fornication,* with a marginal note acknowledging he was not entirely satisfied with that wording. The sense is that the report had spread broadly — not merely within the assembly, but among those outside pointing to those within.

The Flesh and Its Enduring Character

This was not, it would appear, the only case of its kind at Corinth. As we see in 2 Corinthians 12, there were others who had not repented of fornication. The apostle took the worst possible case first, with the expectation that dealing with it — and so rousing the conscience before God — would lead on to the other matters as well.

That the apostle preferred the letter over coming with the apostolic rod is itself instructive. Coming with power does not necessarily bring conscience before

God. Acts of power may not exercise the conscience. It is the Spirit who rouses the exercise before God — so that the Lord Jesus, present in His assembly with His power, might find that assembly morally suitable and agreeable with His presence.

It is an awful thing to think of Christians falling below the world in morality. The apostle says this sin was *not so much as named among the Gentiles.* Some might conclude from those words that the sin should not be named at all — but that is not the force of the phrase. The point is that this particular sin was not a practice among the nations. Indeed, the Greeks named it well enough in the figure of Oedipus — it was part of the theatrical repertoire of the ancient world and had endured for centuries. Not only named, but made the subject of entertainment for the masses. So the force of the phrase is not that the word should not be used, but that this was not a practice common to the heathen.

Marriage: Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 7

It is fitting to contrast two portions of Scripture that bear on the subject of marriage. In Ephesians 5, marriage is set forth in its highest light — husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church, wives being subject to their husbands as the church is subject to Christ. Those reading Ephesians 5, and their neighbours going to the theatre to see that play about the man who had his father's wife — one of those two groups had the better portion. It was those who had the privilege of reading God's Word, wherein the relationship between husband and wife is held in purity and holiness in every respect.

The world today has the same sorts of evil things at the root of its entertainments — often violence and corruption together. The flesh does not change. And it is instructive, in connection with marriage, to see how the subject is taken up in the various epistles according to the state of those addressed.

In Ephesians we get the highest expression. But 1 Corinthians 7 opens thus: *Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.* Is that putting marriage in its highest light and grandeur, as in Ephesians? It is more like the minimum. It was the awful state at Corinth that conditioned what the apostle, by the Spirit, was free to bring before them. He could not bring higher aspects of marriage before a carnal assembly. It was not what is called 'meat in due season.'

The State of the Assembly and the Ministry

Earlier in this book the apostle said, *I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified.* How many times has that verse been twisted to hold ministry to a low level — as though anything beyond the cross were incompatible with it! But what was needed at Corinth was the crucifixion of Christ applied to the flesh. He determined not to know anything but Christ and Him crucified, and then he tells them: *I had to speak to you as carnal, not as spiritual.* That determination was suited to their carnal condition. There would have been deeper things he desired to bring out — as in Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians — but their state precluded it.

In Philippians he says, *I beseech you to be of one mind in the Lord.* How would that have appeared in 1 Corinthians? Utterly unsuitable. When he looked at Philippi he saw a beautiful sheet with a small spot to be removed. When he looked at Corinth he saw a very different picture. Addressing only the little spot while leaving the rest unaddressed would not have been according to the wisdom given to him.

Saints must not mix these things together — must not lump all the epistles into one undifferentiated whole. We do not make a harmony of the four Gospels and mix everything up. Equally we must not do it with the epistles. We compare

scripture with scripture, and see what lines of truth are brought out in a particular epistle, and why — bearing very much in mind the state of the saints to whom the apostle addressed himself.

Praise — What Was and Was Not Given

There is a view almost amounting to a law: whenever you write to someone you ought to begin by praising them. 'After all,' it is said, 'the apostle did that in all his epistles.' No — he did not. There is only one case worse in that regard, and that is where doctrinal evil attacks the very foundations. If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? Hence in Galatians he proceeds immediately to pronounce a curse upon those who pervert the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 1, what did he praise? He praised only what the grace of God had bestowed upon them: *Ye come behind in no gift.* But where is a word of joy in their obedience? Where is pleasure in the conduct of the assembly? It is not there. The only thing praised was what God had given — not what they had done with it.

The primary thing in 1 Corinthians is the carnal and moral state of the assembly. The apostle could not look at their walk and find things to praise. He waits until chapter 3 to tell them: *I have to speak to you as carnal, not as spiritual.* Interestingly, the word *carnal* in 1 Corinthians differs by one Greek letter from its use in Romans, where the carnal man is devoid of divine life. The Corinthians were not devoid of divine life — but they were acting as the true carnal man acts. The first man was coming out in their conduct.

Puffed Up and Not Mourning

They were puffed up — and it is remarkable what they were puffed up about: gifts, teachers and their schools, perhaps doctrinal pretensions. But doctrinal

knowledge is not the same as godliness. The epistles to Timothy and Titus emphasize sound doctrine because if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? Yet in Ephesians, doctrine comes first and the exhortations are founded upon it: if the truth is not received, the exhortations will not enter the soul.

And they had not mourned. Perhaps they had no specific instructions yet for such a case — but did they not all have new life from God? Does not that new life sense that such a thing is nothing but flesh? If they felt without instruction, why did they not fall on their knees before God and plead with Him to remove the evil from their midst?

When Ezra was told that the remnant returned from Babylon had intermarried with the heathen, he said: *When I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. And I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I arose from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the Lord my God, and said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God; for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.*

That man was not a Christian. He was a Jew under the Old Testament, not indwelt by the Holy Spirit as we are. Yet what moral sensibility! What tenderness of conscience! What mourning — the very opposite of being puffed up. The Corinthians had none of this. *Have not rather mourned* — Ezra mourned. The contrast is solemn.

Evil in the Midst

The end of verse 2 is instructive: *that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.* When evil gets the upper hand, it tends to displace the

Lord in the midst, and it becomes the thing that characterizes the assembly. What ought to characterize the assembly is Christ being in the midst — the assembly's conduct should be a portrait of the holy and the true, as He is presented to the church at Philadelphia. When evil gets the upper hand, it takes the central position. It begins to characterize the assembly rather than Christ.

Gift and What Is Due to Christ

There is no hint in 1 Corinthians that God shut off the gifts at Corinth. The gifts did not stop. But gift — however valuable, however much an expression of the ascended Saviour's bounty — is a different order of thing from what is set before us in chapter 5: what is due to Christ. The recognition of that place where the Lord Jesus is truly in the midst of His assembly is not measured by the presence of gift.

To look around Christendom and find where the most gift is exercised — that is not the clue; that is not the mark. God is sovereign. He does not turn the gifts on and off as we might think appropriate. He knew when He gave them that they would be abused, and He did not withhold them on that account. It is still true that there are places in Christendom where, as Christians, we ought not to go. Someone may say, 'But there is gift exercised there.' Very well — God is sovereign. But that is not where the discernment lies as to where we ought to be.

There was a man who tried to defend his loose associations by saying he would tell the Lord, 'I saw You there, Lord, doing wonderful things — so I figured it would be all right for me to be there.' That is a rationalization of man's mind, not the holiness Scripture calls for. What is needed is not the exercise of gift, but a letter like 1 Corinthians — the sword of the Spirit applied to the conscience.

The connection between chapter 5 and Matthew 18:20 is not far to seek. What is due to Christ is at the bottom of our chapter — due to Him because He is there in the midst, and His name is there. One of the things due to Him is that moral evil

should be judged. If the apostle had meant to exclude chapter 5 from being compatible with 'I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified,' he would not have written both in the same epistle. They are in the same book. And what is due to Christ is part of preaching Christ.

— Study ends —