

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 8 May 2005

No. T0365

Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

The church and the World - 1 Corinthians 5 and 6

Before we begin our study, this morning, in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, I want to tell you something that happened nearly sixty years ago, when my sister started being dated by the man she later married. To win her affections, he took her to various venues and events that he thought she might find interesting, or enjoyable. As he lived in the Staffordshire Potteries, eventually, he took her to watch a football match at the Victoria Stadium, which was the home ground of Stoke City, then enjoying first division status. Today we would call it a Premier Division club, but in those days it was not as costly, as it is presently, to buy a couple of tickets.

Looking back, I can't help wondering why he thought she would enjoy watching football, as she had not a flicker of interest in competitive sport, even if the likes of Stanley Matthews were gracing the field. Perhaps it was his interests that came first on the occasion. Whatever the reason, he bought the best seats he could afford, before turning his whole attention to the game once the referee had blown the whistle to start the proceedings. Every few minutes she would attract his attention to ascertain the name of a player, or to ask what had happened that made the crowd so noisy and agitated. Then, apparently, she did not bother him for quite a few minutes, until she touched his elbow to gain his attention, again. This was to inform him that if he looked to the far side of the ground, beyond the area where the match was being played, where there was another large stand, not a second passed without being able to see a glint of light at various places in the stand.

What was happening, of course, was that the spectators were lighting their cigarettes and she could see the flare of a match as it burst into flame, even at the distance of a hundred yards or more. In the darkened stand, where the sunlight was hidden by the massive roof, a tiny match was significant enough to attract my sister's attention away from the action on the park. Needless to say, he did not take her to another football match. Cricket matches, yes, but no more football games!

If you are wondering why I have introduced today's study of the scriptures with a story about my sister's only visit to a football match, it is because she saw the light of many matches amongst the darkness of the stand. Paul stated, in Philippians 2, that Christians should shine as lights in the world. Unfortunately, as we shall see, some of the Christians at Corinth were not shining as they should. Their actions and behaviour were as bad, if not worse, than many of their unbelieving neighbours. We must accept that this should not be.

We have seen, in previous weeks, how the Apostle Paul has brought before the Corinthian believers some of the blessings that God has given to them in Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30, will have to suffice to remind us of this: "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption".

We have also learned how privileges bring responsibilities; of how the church at Corinth should have been shining forth with living faith, mixed with a high quality of moral features. And so we continue this theme, as we look chapters 1 Corinthians 5 and 6.

5:1-2 inform us about the rather impoverished moral state of the church at Corinth. "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".

Before we continue, I wish to make the rather obvious point that the early church was not in any way perfect. The members faced many of the same problems that afflict us and they had to find solutions. Let us put away any thoughts that they had it easy, or practised their faith in a more acceptable world. Their world might have been different from ours, but it was no easier.

From the quoted verses I want us to fasten on to two elements. Firstly, that everybody knew about this particular problem. This, I believe, includes those outside the circle of believers being aware about the loose sexual habits of a couple within the church. We must always be careful that our conduct does not repel onlookers, for we represent the name and interests of the Saviour. Some people are ever ready to be judgmental regarding the conduct of Christians. We should not, therefore, give occasion for gossip. Despite this being an age when faith is on the decrease, and not

especially valued, our fellow citizens are aware that Christianity has standards, so we should not be open to the charge of hypocrisy.

The second point concerns those standards. Corinth itself was a byword for licentiousness and this seems to have coloured the actions of certain believers. It seems that a son was married to his father's wife, or in other words his stepmother. It was a tragedy that this type of relationship was not only prohibited by the Old Testament Scriptures, but also disapproved by pagan Greeks. Paul would have none of this disobedience and, though not present, condemned the situation as one that the church should have dealt with.

The point for us is to carefully guard our actions as individuals, so that we might not bring the church into disrepute. Quite often it might be easier, and more attractive, for us to go along with the fashion of the age; to accept the ideas and behaviour that are current in today's world. That is not the way of historical and spiritual Christianity. Scripture teaches certain ethical standards, and sexual purity is one of them. I say, again, that it might be inconvenient in our society, a society that tends towards pleasing self, for us to pay attention to the demands of Scripture, but pay attention we must, if we want to practise New Testament Christianity.

5:2 reports a further problem present in the Corinthian church: "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you".

From this we can see that pride was clouding their judgment. They, quite probably, took the occasion of the man's sin as a means of demonstrating their freedom from legality. They were emancipated and this brought the opportunity to demonstrate it. Paul had had occasion to reprimand them for their arrogance and conceit in chapter 4. How awful that the followers of the Man who stated that He was meek and lowly of heart should be spiritually proud, especially over a matter that should have given them deep concern.

Sometime ago there was a series of talks on *Truth for Today* about little things. I would judge that we, as Christians, should be content to be little in the service of a great God. It is so easy for us to gain an exaggerated view of our own importance and spirituality, so that we are apt to belittle others, or assume that we are superior. At Corinth, pride caused the Christians to overlook, and tolerate, a situation that should have made them mourn. Paul had already prepared the remedy for the crisis that had arisen, and he outlines this in the next three verses.

We have not the time to quote them but, in summary, it amounts to an official and grave excommunication from the company of believers. Discipline is a measure that we do not often consider today, yet serious breaches of Christian standards should still call for remedial action. If the error is as serious as that at Corinth, the scriptural path is clearly marked out for us, in such passages as we are considering this morning. If the church at Corinth had continued to allow breaches of Christian behaviour and standards, the point would soon have been reached where anything was tolerated in the name of Christian liberty.

Regarding this, one must point out the authority that Paul cites. He could have relied upon the apostolic authority that he hints at in verses 3 and 4, when he says that he was with them in spirit. The real authority, however, is in the church being assembled in the Name of the Lord Jesus, and the power of the Lord Jesus is present. The seriousness and gravity of such a declaration ought to prevent us from arranging kangaroo courts to harangue someone whom we feel has wronged us. Excommunication was a serious and last resort to bring home to the offender that it was the Name and testimony of Christ that was being damaged and defamed. Notice, also, that the aim and objective was the restoration of the offender. Verse 5 talks about the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. This is a drastic remedy for an awful situation and, to bring home the force of this, I wish to quote Dr. Ironside's comments on this verse: "What has caused all this trouble? The activity of the flesh. Very well, put him out in that sphere where he will find out that "it is an evil and bitter thing to forsake the Lord his God." When he finds himself abhorred by men and women who love Christ, when he finds his sin is a stench in the nostrils of Christian people, he may break before God." I think that these comments are sufficient to convey the leverage that excommunication had upon Christians in New Testament times.

I fully grant that, in today's world, with the break-up of the outward unity of the church, such actions do not always have the same force. If a member is excluded from one fellowship, he, or she, could easily find a group of Christians that might not consider their conduct so reprehensible. This, I would judge, is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to be faithful to the Head of the church, who is, of course, the Lord Himself. If we are convinced that the Scriptures are our sole guide in all matters of the faith, conduct and behaviour, then we must follow a pathway that is governed by Scripture.

In this we must always be careful that we are not interpreting a Scripture to our own liking in order to get rid of a person we do not like. The history of the church is littered with cases of splits and divisions over matters and incidents that have no validity, if examined in all honesty and fidelity, in Scripture. Sometimes, whole sections of the Lord's people have been considered as unfaithful and unfit to fellowship with. This, I believe, is dishonouring to the Lord. Such action as excommunication is far too serious for group vendettas!

5:6 states a principle that we do well to remember: "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

Generally, when the Bible mentions leaven, it conveys the thought of evil. Thus, Paul is telling the church that if they ignore the evil being practised by a few in the group, it will eventually contaminate the whole company. In the following verse he also clarifies the remedy, which is to purge out the old leaven. This is not a suggestion for a root and branch exercise of excommunication, but rather a command to deal with the evil present in the lives of the members of the Corinthian church. In verse 8 this is identified as malice and wickedness. The apostle wanted these features replaced with sincerity and truth.

Before we move on to consider chapter 6 I want to underline these last two qualities. If we have sincerity and truth as the governing principles of our actions, in the local church, there will be neither mass excommunications, nor any unjust decisions. We might have differences in some matters, but on fundamentals there should be harmony.

Chapter 6 highlights another topic that needed Paul's wise advice, before it festered into open hostility amongst the Christians at Corinth. It seems to have been a common occurrence for non-criminal quarrels between members of the church to be settled in Roman tribunals. These would, in all probability, be disputes over property, and their first recourse was to take the issue for settlement to a secular court. For Paul this was demeaning the Christian community for, if they could not settle matters between themselves, they were as good as betraying their links in the faith. The apostle was anxious that personal conflicts between Christians should be settled between themselves, as he makes clear in 6:1-4: "dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church."

It must be made clear that Paul is not recommending that crimes of any kind are tried before the church but rather, property disputes or similar civil matters.

Even if we are not as ready these days to go in for litigation when we quarrel with one another, the advice is still pertinent. Far too often we hold out until "my aspirations, my desires, my wishes", prevail. Selfishness and sectional interest, in the guise of principle, is the ruling power. Our honour has to be gratified, and we end up a great deal of distance away from esteeming others greater than ourselves. Verse 7 proffers a radical solution: "Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?"

This would have been the better way, as it was the way of Christ, who suffered reproach and injustice against Himself without seeking retribution.

The section about going to law against each other ends at verse 11, but we can't move on without considering the apostle's conclusion. He is convinced that the actions taken against fellow Christians are symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Therefore, in 6:9, he warns them that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God. He begins the warning with the words "Know ye not", which suggests that they were aware of this truth from previous teaching. This is also a word of warning to us today. When a servant of the Lord ministers the Word, it is not for our entertainment. We might find it interesting, but the major intention of ministry is that we should act upon it. We need to be obedient to the Scriptures and, by the power of the Spirit of God, to put the words and commands into practice. It is of little use knowing something without it affecting our behaviour and manner of life. I also want to point out that Paul carefully guards their position as secure in Christ, for verse 11 states that they were once unrighteous, but now they are washed, sanctified and justified in Christ.

It is instructive for us to pause for a moment, as we consider the general outline of chapter 6, to glance at the truths that Paul says the Corinthians should have known.

- Verse 2, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?"
- Verse 3, "Know ye not that we shall judge angels?"
- Verse 9, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?"
- Verse 15, "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?"
- Verse 16, "Know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body?"; and finally
- Verse 19, "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?"

Obviously we have not the time left to deal with all of these verses in detail, but it is well worth noting them as things that the Corinthians should have known.

I now want to deal with the last part of chapter 6 that moves away from settling quarrels between Christians via the legal system, to consider the practical matter of liberty and licence. Actually, we are really returning to the subject that occupied us in the opening minutes of this morning's talk. The initial verses of chapter 5 were rebuking the lax attitude of the some of the Christians at Corinth, mainly due, or so I believe, to their thinking that in some measure they were superior to others, as they understood and practised the liberty that we have in Christ. The distinction between liberty and licence is easy to blur. The principle is outlined in verses 12 and 13: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but is for the Lord; and the Lord for the body."

We must be very clear when discussing Christian liberty that we never have liberty to sin. No doubt, because we live in a world that appeals to our senses, that we shall sin, but this is not normal Christian practice. John in 1 John 1:9 states that: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We should, therefore, never be wracked by guilt, unless we are being deliberately disobedient.

To return to our theme, it would seem that Paul considers that food and sex are the two activities that were causing trouble at Corinth. That is why he mentions that God will destroy both food and the stomach, both the appetite and the substance. Some there were possibly saying that, as the body will pass away, sexual relations were on the same level as food; both are irrelevant to the life of the spirit. The apostle never agrees, or accepts, such an argument. Food and drink could be matters of conscience, as he makes clear in Romans 14:3. The closing verses of our passage state very clearly that sexual activity was a different matter. I wish to quote the words of a commentator on the Scriptures regarding verse 13: "It was one thing to speak slightly of the stomach, Paul himself could warn his converts against certain people whose "god is their belly", but the body falls within the scope of Christ's saving and sanctifying work: it is for the Lord, not for fornication."

If anyone listening wants further proof, from Scripture, that illicit sexual relations cannot be condoned under a plea of Christian liberty, then we need look no further than verse 18: "Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body: but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body".

The first two words of this verse are pretty conclusive. As I said earlier, it might be inconvenient to parts of our society, that advertises pleasing self as the way to real life, to suggest that the Lord has a different pathway for His children.

In this context, it is important for us to realise that God has a greater destiny for the body than the grave. Verse 14 links our human bodies with the fact of the Lord's resurrection. Not every Christian accepts the necessity of a bodily resurrection for the completion of the saving work of Christ, but we believe the Scriptures point us in that direction when we read verse 14 (amongst others): "And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power."

Though the resurrection body will be of a different order than these mortal bodies, there is still sufficient linkage for us to revere the fact that our body, soul and spirit have a greater destiny, even if we are not sure about every detail. There are two other reasons why our bodies are just as much the Lord's as any of our possessions, and that misuse taints the whole Christian community. The first is that each individual Christian is a member of the mystical body of Christ. Verse 15 is a stern injunction against bad conduct: "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid".

I must emphasise that the apostle is not referring to a relationship within marriage when he brings these warnings. To him, loyalty between a man and his wife and their loyalty to the Lord are paramount.

Finally, our passage this morning closes with a statement about the believer's body that places the matter beyond all argument, taking us onto a higher plane as it does so. "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

The picture is of the Christian's body being the sacred dwelling place of God, bought by the great redemptive work of Christ. Having those truths before us, let us seek, as true believers in Jesus, to walk that pathway pleasing to Him! May each of us, by His grace, seek always to glorify Him in our bodies.

Please Note: We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.