HOW TO TRULY CELEBRATE CHRIST OUR PASSOVER LAMB

1 Corinthians 5:1–13

Key Verse: 5:8

“Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Have you ever thought about the impact of your life? Maybe not just after you’re gone, but right now? Is what I’m doing having an influence on others? Often we have no idea that it’s happening. We may be doing something good, and though we don’t know about it, it helps others. Or we may be doing something bad, and it actually leads others in the wrong way. In today’s passage Apostle Paul addresses the church in Corinth about a serious problem of sexual immorality. But it’s not just about the individual; it’s about the whole church. And it’s not really about judging others; it’s about pleasing God. Today we want to think about what church is, how and why we come together, and how and why we need to deal with sin. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

One of the main themes of 1 Corinthians is how a Christian church should be. At the beginning of this letter Paul addressed the Corinthians as “the church of God in Corinth.” Church is a gathering of people who belong to God. He also said they were “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people” (1:2). Church is a gathering of sinners who’ve accepted the blood of Jesus to cleanse us of sin (cf. 6:11) and who accept God’s calling to live a holy life. It doesn’t mean we’re instantly holy, but that we’ve changed our life direction: from pursuing sin to pursuing holiness. Paul said church is a place where people “call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” and identify with all those who do so (1:2). Church is a gathering of struggling sinners who call on Jesus in prayer to help us, both personally and as a community.

Paul goes on to say that church is a place of spiritual unity (1:10), a group of people who accept the message of the cross of Christ as the power and wisdom of God (1:18,24). Church is a gathering of people who came mainly from humble backgrounds with nothing to boast about, so that they are more willing to boast only in Christ Jesus as our everything, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1:26–31). Church is a place where God’s Spirit reveals his wisdom and his heart to his people (2:6–15). Church is a group of people who have Jesus as their foundation, not any leader (3:11). Church is a sacred group of people who have God’s Spirit dwelling within them (3:16,17). Church is a group of people who imitate the humble, suffering lifestyle of our Lord Jesus and of his true servants who are really following him (4:8–17).

In this letter Paul has been trying to help the Corinthian church to be pleasing to God and different from the godless world. In chapters 1–4 he mainly addressed the divisions among them over leaders based on worldly knowledge. Now in chapters 5–8 he addresses some very practical issues: sexuality, fights, marriage and singleness, improving one’s lot in life, and idolatry. It tells us that church is a place where people apply the faith they learn to their daily struggles in the real world. In chapter 5 Paul begins by addressing a shocking problem.

Read verse 1. The wording here suggests that the woman was probably his stepmother. Since Paul never addresses the woman, most people think she was probably not one of the church members, but the man was. In the Old Testament God forbade his people from having incestuous relationships (Lev 18:8; Dt22:30; 27:20). Even people who don’t believe in God don’t tolerate such relationships. At first the problem seems to be the man’s immorality, but the real problem is how the church responded to it. What did they do about it? Nothing. They just let it go on without saying a word. And that was the problem.

Read verse 2. What did Paul mean when they said they should have “gone into mourning”? Mourning is what people do when somebody dies. They grieve. But Paul isn’t talking about human grief; he’s talking about godly sorrow over sin (2Co7:9,10). Why did the whole church have to be sorrowful about this one church member’s behavior? Partly they should mourn out of their love for the man. But also they should mourn because they had not helped him well. This man’s moral failure was, in a sense, the entire church’s failure. It tells us that church is a place where people take others’ problems as their very own. Later Paul writes that in church each person has “equal concern for each other” and that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (12:25,26). When sin is exposed in a believer’s life, it’s not the time for us to gloat and gossip; it’s the time for us to come to God with genuine mourning and grief.

What else should they have done? Paul says in verse 2 that they should have put this man out of their fellowship. At first this doesn’t seem very loving. It seems they would do this because they were more concerned about themselves than about helping the man! But the right motive for putting him out of their fellowship would not be self-preservation but love. It would be a holy love determined to help this man see his sin before God. The man’s problem was not just his sexual immorality, but the fact that he thought it was okay for a Christian to live like that. He had no remorse over what he was doing.

But how could a real Christian think like that? This man’s case was probably just a symptom of a bigger problem in this church. In the upcoming chapters Paul repeats the phrase: “I have the right to do anything” (6:12,13; 10:23). It was actually something that some of these church members started saying. They meant that because of the grace of Jesus they were free to do whatever they wanted. But that’s not the real meaning of grace. Grace sets us free *from sin*; it doesn’t set us free *to commit sin*. Many people think believing the grace of Jesus makes following rules and laws obsolete. But that’s not true at all. The grace of Jesus, Paul writes elsewhere, teaches us to “say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives…” (Tit2:11,12). Clearly this man having his father’s wife had a warped view of grace. Paul wanted this church to protect “the true grace of God” (1Pe5:12).

He starts with his own example. Read verse 3. Though Paul couldn’t be there physically, when he heard the report that this was happening, he immediately “passed judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus” on the man who’d been doing this. Pass judgment? For many of us, that throws up a red flag. Didn’t Jesus command us not to judge? (Mt7:1,2). But many churches are known mostly for being judgmental, not Christ-like. People who try to go to church to get help often experience this judgmentalism. They get judged for their appearance, judged for their background, and especially judged for their failures. Shouldn’t church be a place where sinners are welcomed and accepted, not judged?

What did Paul mean that he “passed judgment” on this man “in the name of the Lord Jesus”? It means with Jesus’ authority. At the beginning of the next chapter Paul again uses this word “judgment” or “judge” as something we as believers should be doing. What does it mean? The Greek word means to separate, and it mainly means to discern between right and wrong. To “pass judgment” in this case means, in a famous idiom, “to call a spade a spade,” to call out what is wrong, or as Paul says elsewhere, “so that sin might be recognized as sin,” and as “utterly sinful” (Ro7:13). It tells us that many people don’t have much of an awareness of sin. In our society it seems everybody can do whatever they want as long as they don’t seem to be harming others. Even people in the church can sometimes be pretty numb to sin. To some degree we might want to call out sin in our society. But at the end of this chapter Paul writes that he has no business judging those outside the church; that’s God’s job (5:12,13). So this “passing judgment” should be reserved for church members. To us, that still doesn’t sound so good. But again, this is a different kind of judgment. It doesn’t mean to condemn, but to educate—even though it’s painful. It’s to help a fellow believer realize what sin is, how deadly and destructive sin can be. In this case, passing judgment is for clarity. It’s also out of love.

Read verses 4,5. Here, “hand this man over to Satan” probably means to expel him from attending their church. All the church members had to do it collectively. Why? It says, “for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord” (5b). It tells us that this action of passing judgment was not to condemn the man, but to save him. Only through this kind of radical, painful, collective action from the entire church could this man begin to see how sinful it is to indulge his flesh desires at the expense of God’s moral law. Living against God’s truth eventually causes anyone to lose the blessing of being among his people. Nobody in the church was to sympathize with this man. It’s called “tough love.” We’re called to love people not with our human love, but with God’s love, a love that helps people not to remain in sin but really come to God.

Look at verses 6–8. Here Paul mentions yeast and “leavened” and “unleavened” bread. In this case, just a tiny bit of “yeast” is what puffs up a big clump of “dough.” Yeast is symbolic of pride. Often it’s just a little bit of sinful pride that causes us to ignore what God says and stubbornly keep on sinning. In this letter Paul rebukes this church repeatedly, both directly and indirectly, for being proud, arrogant and boastful (1:29,31; 3:21; 4:7,18,19; 5:2,6; 9:16; 13:3,4). No doubt this man committing incest was proud, but the church was proud, too. Paul is saying here in verses 6–8 that it wasn’t just this one sinful man in their church but also their pride that was ruining the quality of their fellowship.

By talking about yeast, unleavened bread and the Festival, Paul is harking back to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, which all Jews kept. These Corinthian church members were mostly not Jewish, but they got familiar with the Old Testament so that they could learn who God is and how he wants his people to live. Christians don’t have to keep the Jewish Passover Festival, because Christ is our true Passover Lamb. Now, as Christians we need to celebrate the real Festival of Jesus and what he did for us through sacrificing his life on the cross. We usually do this once a year at Easter. But it’s something we always should be doing as a church. Whenever we take communion, we’re celebrating Jesus our Passover Lamb. It’s to help us remember Jesus’ sacrifice and what he did for us. Our Lord Jesus gave his body and shed his blood to forgive us and save us (11:24–26). As we think about his sacrifice, we begin to have a healthy view of our own sin. In light of his sacrifice we can see how serious sin really is. We all need a church community to help us remember his grace. We also can keep this Festival privately, in our personal devotions.

But the problem is, churches can lose the spirit of what Jesus did for us and just observe the rituals. In fact, the Jews had this problem with celebrating Passover. This is why God told them to eat bread without yeast for a week. They actually had to sweep all the yeast out of their houses. It was to help them humble themselves before God in repentance. Read verse 7. To “get rid of the old yeast” means to repent of living according to our old sinful nature. Though God changes us when we believe in Jesus, we still have to struggle against our old selves. What is our “old yeast” or “old self”? In our old self we’re darkened in our understanding and separated from the life of God due to the ignorance that is in us due to the hardening of our hearts. We lose all sensitivity and give ourselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity and greed. We’re corrupted by our own deceitful desires (Eph4:18,19,22). But in Jesus we really are a “new unleavened batch.” It means he’s given us a new self. This new self is created to be like God, in true righteousness and holiness (Eph4:24). We can’t be who we’re really created to be unless we’re struggling against our sin.

We can see through these verses how Paul is trying to help this church. By tolerating this man, it would be like giving in to sin, both as a community and as individuals. Church is a place where believers encourage each other to really live a new life in Christ. Also, a church’s focus should not be on our own moral purity or performance, but on Christ our Passover Lamb, the only one who can heal us and save us from our sins. Just celebrating Easter or communion outwardly isn’t enough, because it doesn’t really touch our sinful nature.

What should we do? Read verse 8. The old bread leavened with malice and wickedness is the underlying sin in our hearts. In contrast, the unleavened bread is a repentant heart, someone who’s sincere, honest and willing to face the truth. To really celebrate the Festival of Christ our Passover Lamb, we need this sincerity and truth. It challenges us not to live a double life, but a genuine, repentant life. Otherwise we start to treat one another with malice and wickedness.

Look at verses 9–11. Paul clarifies how to apply this principle. Church should not be a place where people hide from the sinful world. In fact, church members should be like our Lord Jesus, who was known as a friend of sinners. His friendship was not to tolerate sin, but to save sinners. We can imitate Jesus the friend of sinners only when we’re spiritually strong. Paul is mainly teaching here about preserving a healthy spiritual environment in the church where sin is not condoned but dealt with clearly. It’s not about being overbearing with new or struggling believers but about dealing with people who insist on continuing in sin. The Bible repeatedly tells us not to associate with such people (2Th3:14,15) not to treat them as enemies, but to warn them and help them repent.

Read verse 8 again. May God help us come together with sincerity and truth to really celebrate Jesus our Passover Lamb and his wonderful grace. May God grant us the courage to deal with sin in our own lives and in our community.