



**151<sup>st</sup> Church of Christ**  
**Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS**  
by Richard Wolfe

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**AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH**  
*A Study in 1 Corinthians*  
**TEACHER – Lesson 8**

**GENERAL OUTLINE**

**1 Corinthians 5:1-6:20, Reported Problems**

**OUTLINE: Lesson 8**

**1 Corinthians 5:1-13, Incest and Judging**

- 5:1-5        Incest: Sin in the church
- 5:6-8        Leaven in the lump
- 5:9-13      Judging insiders or outsiders

In chapters 1-4, Paul developed the theological foundation that God-given spiritual wisdom will produce understanding and behavior that is considered foolish by the world's standards. Christians will not only do some different things (e.g., pray, attend church services, worship a single God), but they will think differently, weigh right and wrong by a different set of scales, and seek different, eternal, goals.

On that foundation Paul will now address a series of issues specific to the Corinthian church situation. Some of these issues have been "reported" to him (e.g., 5:1), while others came to him through questions asked by the congregation (e.g., 7:1). In all cases, Paul calls Christians to think and respond following the wisdom revealed by God through His prophets and apostles regardless of what the foolishness of the world expects or perceives to be normal and acceptable.

Paul opens this section with a case of immorality involving a church member that was more worldly than what the world would generally accept, but that in their self-described spiritual sophistication, the Corinthian Christians tolerated. Since only the man is targeted, we will assume that the woman was not a Christian, and therefore, not to be held accountable by the church. We know nothing about the father, but it is possible that he was deceased, which the son may have used to rationalize and justify his actions. These details would have been known to the original readers of this letter.

**DISCUSSION**

**1 Corinthians 5:1-5, Incest: Sin in the church**

**1. Who might have reported this situation to Paul?**

- Those of Chloe's household, 1:11
- Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus, 16:17

- 2. Think of some ways in which being “puffed up” (v. 2, ESV “arrogant”) stands in the way of godly behavior and repentance. What kind of “mourning” does Paul reference, and how would mourning produce a different reaction than being puffed up?**

Various answers might be suggested by class members. Among them, we could imagine that being puffed up (arrogant, especially about our spiritual understanding of life) would justify misbehavior by a variety of reasons. The arrogant have difficulty admitting wrongdoing.

The mourning is probably the sadness that would come when we recognize shameful, sinful behavior in our midst.

- 3. Who was puffed up? The man or the church? To whom does Paul address his instructions about what to do in this situation? What does this tell us about Paul’s primary focus in this letter?**

If he encountered the man in question, Paul would certainly have called for remorse and repentance. But in this passage every imperative instruction is addressed to the church (e.g., “you are puffed up,” “when you are gathered together,” “Your glorying is not good.”) While concerned about the man’s salvation (v. 5), Paul is focused primarily on the spiritual health of the church, and the exercise of spiritual thinking in the church.

- 4. Is it imaginable that a church would decide to tolerate or endorse something forbidden in Scripture (such as sexual immorality) and claim that their decision was the result of a spiritual advancement to which other churches should aspire?**

Churches often claim that unscriptural changes are the outcome of months of study and prayer. Supposedly, this study and prayer produced a new and more spiritual understanding of biblical statements that previously were thought to forbid the practice or position adopted.

Churches accepting homosexual practices and same-sex marriages claim to be more loving than those who reject these practices. They assume a spiritual sophistication that others lack. Other matters provide additional examples of such “puffed up” attitudes.

- 5. Several times, in various ways, Paul calls for coordinated church action towards the man. Identify the various ways Paul describes this action. (Hint: I found four.)**

Verse 2: taken away from among you.

Verse 5: deliver such a one to Satan.

Verse 7: purge out the old leaven.

Verse 13: put away from yourselves that wicked person.

**6. What does it mean to “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (cf. 1 Timothy 1:20; Romans 7:5-6; Galatians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; Matthew 5:29-30)?**

It does not mean literally to destroy his fleshly body, but rather to encourage subduing the desires of the flesh in order to give way to godly living. In this instance, it was hoped that by being excluded from the fellowship of the church the man would miss the benefits of that fellowship, repent, change his behavior, and be restored to a right relationship with both the church and the Lord.

**1 Corinthians 5:6-8 Leaven in the lump**

In the first five verses of the chapter, Paul has identified a serious problem in the congregation and has told them *what* they should do about it. In these 2 verses, he uses the analogy of leaven in bread to explain *why* this situation should not be allowed to continue unchecked.

**7. What was done with leaven leading up to and during celebration of the Passover (Exodus 12:15-20)? What was to be done to anyone who violated this command?**

Leaven was to be removed from the house of every Israelite family, and only unleavened bread eaten. Violators were to be “cut off from Israel.” It is generally believed that to be cut off from Israel refers to capital punishment. Removing the leaven was important.

**8. What earlier analogy had Paul used that would emphasize the importance of keeping the church as pure as possible, and what would happen to those who contaminated the church?**

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, the church is said to be God’s temple, and those who destroy it will be destroyed. The sin and the church’s toleration of the sin defiled God’s temple. His actions had an impact on the entire congregation, just as leaven expands throughout a loaf of bread.

**9. On the basis of Paul’s analogy, do you think that he believed that, in some cases, the “slippery slope” principle could present a real danger in the church?**

Yes. That's exactly what this passage teaches. Acceptance of one sin often encourages the acceptance of more sin. We don't become more godly by lowering the standards. Once we rationalize or justify wrong behavior, we are inclined to do the same in other matters.

### **1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Judging insiders or outsiders**

Paul had written an earlier letter to the Corinthians (a letter that we do not have), in which he had been misunderstood. In that letter he had told them, "not to keep company with the sexually immoral." They didn't realize that this statement wasn't about our interaction with people of the world, but was to be understood only in the context of life within the church. We should expect people of the world to behave in worldly ways, but we should hold ourselves to a higher standard.

**10. What do we know from the content of 1 Corinthians that indicates that Paul doesn't think that only perfect Christians are qualified to hold others accountable and even to take decisive action if they fail to repent? What kind of Christians were to confront this man?**

The entire letter is devoted to correcting various wrongs and misbehavior in the congregation. He doesn't in any way suggest that the immoral brother could be challenged only after all the other problems had been corrected. They were all imperfect Christians, but, even so, they were to exclude the persistently sexually immoral man.

**11. What are we to make of the fact that while Paul calls for the immoral brother to be "disfellowshipped," he doesn't call for the same action for the other sins and problems addressed in the letter?**

Several angles can be considered. In some ways, sexual immorality is different from other sins addressed (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:18). It could also suggest that sexual immorality, even if not more serious, was extremely prevalent in the Corinthian culture (as in our own), and therefore, presented more problems. There is also the possibility that it wasn't the sexual immorality that was worse, but the blatant, unrepentant attitude of this man.

**12. What Christian writer included an entire chapter about love in the church in one of his books? What book was that? Does not the command to love contradict this instruction to judge?**

It was Paul in chapter 13 of this very letter. Apparently, he didn't see a contradiction between treating each other with love, and holding each other accountable for lifestyles that harm ourselves and the church.

**13. If a person isn't living a godly life, how can we tell who is an "insider," and who is an "outsider."**

Being "in Christ" or not is not a subjective determination, nor can it be assumed that we can always tell from observation of a person's life. A person is "in Christ," who, driven by faith, has put on Christ in baptism (cf. Galatians 3:26-27). These "insiders" are expected to live godly lives, but they (we) often don't. That was the case of the immoral Christian in the Corinthian church. He was "inside," but acting as if he were "outside."

**14. What factors either permit or demand that we judge one another, and what factors exclude judging (cf. Matthew 7:1-5; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)? Are Christians expected, in some cases, to judge one another?**

Authorized judging: with humility, with love, with genuine concern for others and the church. In concert with spiritually-minded people (v. 4) rather than acting on one's own, especially when disciplinary action is involved.

Unauthorized judging: with arrogance, with a judgmental, self-righteous, destructive attitude.

Yes. Being "added to the church" implies accountability to one another.