"Excommunication: For the Restoration of the Sinner and the Purity of the Church"

1 Corinthians 5

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11/15/2026

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (p. 954). If you're visiting today, after I read this passage, you may wonder why I would choose to preach on this particular text and not something more uplifting and positive. Here at Trinity, we preach expository sermons, which often looks like preaching through entire books of the Bible, from beginning to end, not picking and choosing which passages we think people would like. We desire to preach the whole counsel of God, not just the popular and positive passages. This passage is shocking and uncomfortable, and for some of you it might bring up sad memories and heartache. It is a sobering passage. But here in God's Word there is great wisdom, instruction, and hope for us. We need 1 Corinthians 5 to be a healthy, holy, and hopeful church.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (ESV)

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Three weeks ago, Israel Ford and his wife Lydia, pastors of LifeWorks Church in Cleveland, Ohio, made a big, shocking announcement to their church and on Instagram. The man is a self-proclaimed prophet and he had his wife Lydia announce and introduce to the church the prophet's *second wife*. She shared with pride that they were in a polygamous relationship. The other woman came up to the front as the audience gave her a standing ovation.[1]

Self-proclaimed prophets taking multiple wives isn't anything new. Muhammed did it, as did Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, David Koresh, and many others.[2] Kind of a red-flag, right?

What happened at LifeWorks church is not far off from what was happening in the Corinthian church here in chapter 5. In both cases there's gross sexual immorality in a church that names the name of Christ, and of a kind not even tolerated by most unbelievers. And there's arrogance about it. In both cases the situation is public knowledge and nobody was taking action. Both are clear cases for excommunication, for the sexually immoral people to be removed from the church. But there is also one huge difference between the Corinthian church and LifeWorks Church. LifeWorks is non-denominational and it doesn't even have an elder board. And so all the power is in the hands of the prophet and his wives. The Corinthian church, however, had authority outside of their local church that they needed to submit to. Paul had the authority to call for the excommunication of the man. Church government matters. Church discipline matters. It matters for the sake of the holiness of the church, for the restoration of sinners, and for the glory of Jesus' name.

As we study this chapter, we'll read about a just excommunication. We'll define what excommunication is and when it's a just and necessary action for a church to take. As we walk through this passage we'll look at three things: the disgraceful situation, the clear directive of Paul, and the honorable purpose of excommunication.

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[1] https://roysreport.com/ohio-pastor-announces-second-wife-embraces-polygamy/

[2] We love and are so thankful for religious liberties in America, but it has come at the cost of America being a breeding ground for cults and false teachers for the past 250 years. And yet we firmly believe, in light of the passage today, that it is not the job of those outside the church to judge those inside the church. The state may execute but not excommunicate.

1. A Just Excommunication

a. The Disgraceful Situation (1 Cor. 5:1-2a)

i. Sexual immorality: a man has his father's wife (v. 1)

Let's begin by looking at verses 1 and 2, The Disgraceful Situation. In verse 1 we see that Paul has caught wind of a shocking case of incest in the Corinthian church: "**a man has his father's wife.**" This most likely refers to a stepmother but there is a chance it's the man's biological mother. Paul is appalled, like any normal person would be. Even non-Christians don't tolerate this kind of thing. In Paul's day, the pagans in the Greco-Roman society tolerated quite a lot of sexual immorality. It was a sexually-permissive culture not too dissimilar from America. But not even the pagans would be okay with what this guy was doing. Sometimes in his letters, Paul calls out people by name, but he doesn't here, because everyone reading this letter knew exactly who he was talking about. This was public knowledge, public sin. It was a disgrace on so many levels, a smear on the reputation of Christ in Corinth.

ii. The church's response: arrogance and apathy (v. 2a)

And so Paul is not only appalled at what this man is doing, he's also shocked at how the Corinthian church has responded to it… or hasn't responded to it. Look at verse 2: "**And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?**" In chapter 4 Paul was calling out the Corinthians for their arrogance in other matters (4:6, 18-19), and now once again Paul exposes their pride, their puffed-up view of themselves. These Christians were not only tolerating this man and his sin, but they were prideful in how they were dealing with it. They prided themselves in tolerating sexual immorality, maybe thinking they were being extra gracious and loving. People think that way today, don't they? Some things don't change. But Paul calls them out for their disgraceful tolerance. They should be mourning over this man's sin and over their own sin of tolerance and how it damaged their church and the reputation of Christ in their city.

b. The Clear Directive (1 Cor. 5:2b-5a, 11)

i. Excommunicate the man (v. 2b-5a)

And so because of their arrogant inaction, Paul takes the lead. He gives a clear directive at the end of verse 2: "**Let him who has done this be removed from among you.**" This is what we call excommunication, the removal of someone from the covenant community of the church. It's worth noting that Paul only calls for *the man* to be removed from the church and not the woman. Why's that? We don't know for certain but she's likely an unbeliever, someone who is already outside the church. Paul says later in verse 12 that the church doesn't judge those outside the church, so I think that's why Paul ignores the woman and gives all the attention to the man and to the church who tolerated this man's sin.

In verses 3-5 Paul explains more of the process of excommunication that the church must take: "**3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh….**"

ii. What is excommunication? (1 Cor. 5:2, 5, 11; cf. Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 1:19-20)

So what is excommunication? We'll use these verses and others to fill out a definition and process for us. First, we see in verse 3 that excommunication is a form of "**judgment**." Paul pronounced judgment on the man even though he was physically absent and he expected his authoritative judgment to be obeyed by the Corinthian church. Paul would be there in spirit in a sense, because his authority and direction on this matter would be followed. But more importantly than Paul's authority was the authority and power of the Lord Jesus Christ. We see this in verse 4. The church was to assemble "**in the name of the Lord Jesus**" recognizing "**the power of our Lord Jesus"**. What does that mean? It means that we believe that the Lord Jesus rules and acts through his church. We are to believe that when a church makes an action in line with the will of God that it is Lord Jesus himself who is ultimately taking action through the church. The church can and does err in its judgment, it is not infallible, but nevertheless, we believe Jesus rules by moving in

and through his body, the church. And so excommunication, when it is just and in harmony with the word of God, it is not merely an act of a pastor or a session or a church… it is an act of judgment by the Lord Jesus Christ. And so it must be taken very seriously, handled with the utmost wisdom and prayer.

Look now at the beginning of verse 5. Paul explains the spiritual significance of excommunication in the most sobering terms: "**5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh**". That's one of the scariest lines in the whole Bible. So what does it mean? What's going on here? When someone is removed from membership in a church, barred from the Lord's Supper, they are being declared to be outside of the church, not inside it, and if outside the church, they are therefore inside the domain of Satan and under his rule. The Bible speaks of Satan's rule as "**the domain of darkness**" (Col. 1:13) and as Satan as "**the prince of the power of air**" (Eph. 2:2) and "**the god of this world**" who "**has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ**" (2 Cor. 4:4). He is like a prowling lion, seeking to devour the spiritually blind (1 Pet. 5:8). And in 1 Timothy 1:19-20, Paul says that he "**handed over to Satan"** two men named "**Hymenaeus and Alexander"** who had **"made shipwreck of their faith."** And so the church's act of excommunication is an acknowledgement that the individual has been living under the rule of Satan all along. The church doesn't put that person under Satan's rule, it publicly acknowledges that the person has always been under Satan's rule and so their place is outside the holy body of Christ. The church doesn't take anyone's salvation away, it declares that the person never was saved, never truly believed and repented.

Excommunication was not something made up by Paul, but it was taught by the Lord Jesus himself in Matthew 18 and it was a commanded practice in the Old Testament, although it sometimes looked different. In the Old Testament, certain acts of disobedience to God's law resulted in the removal of the person from the nation of Israel (Ezra 10:7-8, Gen. 17:14, Lev. 20:17), while others resulted in execution (Lev. 20:20, 27; Deut. 19:11-13). Israel was a shadow of the New Testament church in many ways, so there are similarities and differences. One difference now is that the church does not have the power of the sword. We do not execute, we excommunicate, but we do so with a clearer and more sobering spiritual warning than what you see in the Old Testament.

In Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18, he gives us a whole series of steps to take to confront someone in sin and to call them to repent and receive the mercy of God. The final step is excommunication. So why didn't Paul follow all those steps here in 1 Corinthians 5? Why does he go straight to excommunication? It is because this man's sin was so heinous, so public, and had been unrepented of for quite some time. A church can bypass the first steps of Matthew 18 in certain extreme situations like this one, like if a congregant committed some heinous crime that was clearly the result of hiding and unrepentance. It takes wisdom to discern each situation on its own, but a church does not need to do every step in Matthew 18 to excommunicate someone. I've had someone complain to me about bypassing steps, but wisdom and the protection of vulnerable people sometimes warrant a bypass.

iii. When should someone be excommunicated? (v. 1, 11)

So that's what excommunication is, now when should someone be excommunicated? When we compare passages in the Old Testament with Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, we get three markers, three red-flags, that would signal to a Session that excommunication is the will of the Lord Jesus Christ: a person should be removed from the church if their sin is (1) outward, (2) serious, and (3) unrepentant. I get these three categories from Jonathan Leeman's helpful book titled "Church Discipline."[3] Outward, serious, and unrepentant. All three of those markers need to be present to justify excommunication.

First, a sin must be <u>outward</u>. All sin starts as sin of the heart, but some sin is killed by the Holy Spirit before it becomes outwardly expressed through our words and actions. Inward sins are certainly serious, but if pride or anger or lust stays only in the heart, in its seed form, and is not allowed to grow, then that is a mark of a Christian, not a mark of unbeliever. So a sin must be outward, it must have grown from the heart to speech or actions that others can see and hear.

Second, a sin must be <u>serious</u>. Now obviously all sin is serious and damnable. But certain outward sins are more serious because they cause significant damage to people, to

[3] Leeman, Jonathan, Church Discipline, Crossway, 2012, pp. 54-55.

relationships, to the church, to society, or to the reputation of Christ. These are sins that have been left unmortified and have been fed by the person, and they have grown and grown. A person's inward anger, for example, becomes expressed outwardly through biting words or insults or profanity, then it grows to threats and verbal abuse, and then it grows to physical assault and abuse and slander, putting others in the way of danger. And those sins, if left to themselves, sometimes grow to murder, rape, adultery, and many sins too shameful to be mentioned here. And so a church's session needs to weigh out the seriousness of a person's sin.

And the third marker that must also be present is that a sinner must be <u>unrepentant</u>. There are many a true child of God who has committed outward and serious sins, but who by God's grace have seen their guilt, repented, and begun to walk in holiness in that area of their life. True repentance is the mark of every true Christian. But a session can discern if someone is unrepentant if they are living as if they are a law unto themselves, when they take no care to hear and follow the law of God. Their hearts are hard, they bristle at confrontation and defend themselves to the death. They blame others and take no ownership to their part of the problem. They dig in their heels and double down. They're not open to the guidance of church leaders or others mature in faith. They let fear, shame, lust, pride, and unbelief rule their decisions rather than the Lord Jesus Christ and his holy word. Their sin doesn't smell that bad to them. Like a hoarder, they're comfortable living in their mess. They don't want to clean house. Or maybe they only play the victim card. Or sometimes they'll just straight up say that they don't believe in God anymore or they say they're going to follow Jesus their own way. These are some of the marks of unrepentance.

In verse 11, Paul gives some examples of sins that would be worthy of excommunication: "**11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.**" This isn't an exhaustive list, murder isn't on here, so why does Paul list these ones in particular? Paul may have been aware of other sins in the Corinthian church that would also need to be considered for excommunication. But Paul may be drawing from several categories of sins in Deuteronomy that were worthy of excommunication or execution. The final quote of this chapter in the last verse says "**Purge the evil person from among you,**" a quote that gets

repeated again and again in Deuteronomy for various sins and it often refers to execution.[4] So as Christians, we can look into Deuteronomy and the rest of Scripture to see what sins are most heinous in God's sight to help us determine which ones qualify for excommunication.

And so excommunication is only fitting if someone's sin is outward, serious, and unrepentant. If any one of those red flags is missing, then the church should continue to patiently, graciously, and mercifully help that saint to hold onto the gospel of Jesus and pursue a life of holy freedom from sin.

c. The Honorable Purpose (1 Cor. 5:5b-13)

i. For the restoration of the sinner (v. 5b)

After Paul gives his clear directive to remove the man, he gives two honorable purposes for excommunication. Excommunication should be done for the reconciliation and restoration of the sinner and for the purity of the church. These purposes should motivate and color all of our communication and actions in a church discipline situation.

Look at verse 5, here's the first purpose: the restoration of the sinner, "**you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.**" This is notably a difficult verse to interpret, but it seems to indicate that the hope is that when the man is handed over to Satan and removed from church membership, that God would use that discipline for "**the destruction of the flesh**" which might mean that he'll face the physical consequences of his sin, but it more likely refers to the destruction of his fleshly character, his old nature, that God would use this means of discipline to warn him of the dangers of his soul and to wake him up to his sin and his need for salvation in Christ. And so through true faith and true repentance his flesh is destroyed and his spirit is saved on the day of the Lord when he comes to judge the earth.

This purpose is very important. The goal of excommunication or any step of church discipline *is the restoration of the sinner*. It's not to shame or to punish or to get even. It's to call the person to faith in the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ. Excommunication is an act of love. It's hard love, it might not be received as love. It might be responded to with hate

[4] Deut. 13:1-5; 17:2-7; 19:16-19; 21:18-21; 22:21-22, 30; 24:7

and slander against church leadership. But excommunication is the most loving thing a church can do in these kinds of situations.

Does verse 5 promise that excommunication will result in the person repenting and being saved? No, but it does give us hope that God does use it as a means to save the lost. I have heard stories from other churches of excommunicated people coming to faith, repenting, and coming back to the church and being restored with great joy. I read about some as I studied for this sermon.[5] Oh that God would do that here and in many other churches! May many prodigal sons and daughters come to their senses, come home and be received with open arms by their loving Father and by a loving church.

ii. For the purity of the church (vv. 6-13)

The second purpose Paul gives is that the removal of this incestuous man will be for the purity of the church. Read with me from verses 6 through 8: "**6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."**

Paul uses the analogy of bread dough to make his point that an unbeliever living in heinous sin in a church will eventually damage and corrupt that church. He is like a little leaven in a lump of dough that eventually leavens the whole lump. He is like gangrene in a wound that can spread to the entire body, causing sepsis, shock, multi-organ failure, and even death. How many men in LifeWorks Church are thinking maybe they should get a second wife too? When sin is tolerated or even celebrated by a church, it is embraced by the people. Greedy prosperity preachers spread their greed to their congregation. When sex before marriage and adultery and pornography and homosexuality are ignored or even celebrated in a church, it grows and spreads in that congregation. When unbelief in the gospel is tolerated, it's contagious. And if a church continues to embrace unholy living, it

[5] https://www.9marks.org/article/a-tale-of-three-cities-a-testimony-of-grace-through-church-discipline/ https://cerc.com.my/our-stories/jan-tie/2025/02/13/why-i-left-cerc-and-came-back-nathans-story/ https://www.pcahistory.org/HCLibrary/periodicals/session2/s2s3-1.pdf

will eventually die and be no true church at all. Such is the case of many, many so-called churches in the United States, many who fly pride flags, exposing their arrogance and their disobedience to this chapter of the Bible.

To maintain the purity of the church, after a person has been excommunicated, Paul instructs the church to not associate with that person. Read with me verse 9 to the end, "**9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."**

What does it mean to not associate with an excommunicated person? Paul gives one potential application – it might look like not sharing a meal with that person. Now with the commentaries I read, older and newer, this doesn't seem to be interpreted as a complete ban on eating any kind of a meal with someone who has been removed. Back in Paul's day, eating a meal with someone may have had a greater sense of connection and community with that person. I think to help us determine what it means to not associate, we should work with this general principle: our interactions with an excommunicated person should not communicate to them directly or indirectly that we think they're a brother or sister in Christ, but rather that we desire for them to repent and be restored. We shouldn't interact with them as if nothing's happened. But we also shouldn't practice shunning and avoid even saying *hi* if we run into them at the grocery store. We can still love them without them thinking we think they're alright with God. Some people who have been excommunicated try to slander church leadership and try to convince people to their side of things and to leave the church. So if someone's doing that kind of thing, it might be best to limit your contact with them, at least for a season. If the person is a family member, it is alright to eat with them and enjoy family life together, while still communicating in other ways that you do not think they are right with God. Those situations are especially sensitive and difficult and require much prayer and counsel.

So can an excommunicated person come to worship at church? It depends on the situation, but in most situations that would be completely fine. After all, we want them to hear the gospel and be saved. But they should not receive the Lord's Supper, for they would be eating in an unworthy manner, as we'll read about in a few chapters in 1 Corinthians 11. If someone has a restraining order or if there was some kind of abuse or adultery and there's a victim in the congregation, then we'd likely ask for that person not to come to worship but to find another church.

And so as a church, for the restoration of sinners, for the purity of the church, and ultimately for the honor of the name of Christ, we must practice church discipline and not be afraid to excommunicate when it is God's will.

But in order to practice excommunication, a church must have meaningful church membership. In verses 12 and 13, Paul refers to outsiders and insiders. There is an outside to the visible church and there is an inside to the visible church. The wall that dictates that distinction is church membership. A church without meaningful church membership is like a building without walls – there's no clear boundary about who's in the church and who's out. There's no clear distinction of who's under the authority of the elders and who is not. And so if you believe a church should practice excommunication, you must also affirm that church membership is a wise practice to make excommunication actually meaningful, clear, and orderly. Church membership also allows for the elders of the church to take care of you, to help you fight sin before it grows out of control. So if you've been attending here for a while and you're planning on staying, please consider membership, so that we can take care of you and you can help take care of others, so that none of us "**may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**" (Heb. 3:13). And you don't need to be a convictional presbyterian to become a member. We have 5 membership vows that are broadly evangelical. So you don't need to affirm the whole Westminster Standards to join the church body.

For the sake of the purity of the church, for the sake of the restoration of sinners, and for the sake of the reputation of Christ, church discipline matters. Church government and elders and denominations matter. Church membership matters. These are all humble, fallible means by which the Lord Jesus Christ can rule in and through his church.

2. An Unjust Excommunication: The Hope of All Sinners

We've seen Paul address this shocking situation in chapter 5 here and command a just excommunication. But now I want us to think about an *unjust* excommunication. Paul alludes to it in verse 7, "**For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed.**" Yes, the death of Jesus Christ was an unjust excommunication, and his unjust excommunication is the hope for all sinners, for each one of us here and for every person who has been removed from the church. Jesus was completely innocent, and yet he was arrested. False witnesses slandered him at his trial, his kangaroo court. Even Pontius Pilate found him innocent, but he released a guilty man to the Jews and handed Jesus over to be crucified. Just as sinners in the Old Testament were removed to the outside of the camp of Israel, so also Jesus was taken outside of Jerusalem, excommunicated and executed. Hebrews 13:12 says, "**12 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.**" By Jesus' unjust excommunication, you and I and everyone can find sanctification and forgiveness in his blood. He was excommunicated so that we could commune with God and one another forever.

So if you are here and you're wandering far away from God, living in sin, doing things you'd never thought you'd do, be found today by your good Shepherd. Return like the prodigal son. His blood is able to sanctify you and to restore you to himself. Do not let fear hold you back from repenting from your sin! If your sin is growing and it's getting out of control, don't let fear keep you from getting help! Confess it to someone. The most common sin people confess to me is sexual immorality. And each person who has has been so relieved once they've done so. There is peace in confessing your sin, in praying with a brother or sister, in receiving the forgiveness of Christ. Any sin can be forgiven and washed clean by the blood of Christ; it has never found its match.

This passage is a call for all of us to be humble and to commit ourselves to a life of repentance by the power of the Holy Spirit. As we hear of those who have fallen into sin or have left the faith, we should humbly remind ourselves of this phrase, "There but for the grace of God, go I." Let us pray.