The Woodshed

1 Cor. 5:1

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even among the Gentiles—that one of you has his father’s wife.

Yes, this verse is in the Bible. Yes, it really happened. This is one of the reasons I believe the Bible is true and accurate. It’s as honest as peeling paint. There’s no whitewashing evil, even when it is uncomfortable. And boy, this sure is!

“Has his father’s wife” is a euphemism meaning “has sexual relations with his father’s wife”. The word “has” indicates continuous present action, not a one-time event. Yeow! Does this mean his mother? Probably not because it would say that directly. Either way, we’re in LA-LA land, far away from spiritual thinking, to say the least! What’s going on?

I will propose a scenario that could fit the verse and context. A man who was a part of the Corinthian church was having an intimate sexual relationship with his stepmom. How could this happen? Let’s say his mother passed away. This is reasonable because in the first century Roman Empire, the average life expectancy at birth for men was estimated to be around 22-33 years, with those who survived childhood potentially living into their 40s or 50s. The average life expectancy for women at that time was about 25-32 years old and the minimum age of marriage was about 12 years old. So, if the son’s mother died and the father remarried, it is possible that the new wife and son were similarly aged. Perhaps that explains the attraction between son and stepmom, but it certainly doesn’t excuse their relationship. The Bible is crystal clear:

Lev. 18:6-8 20:11

None of you is to approach anyone who are his close relatives to uncover their nakedness; I am Yahweh.

You are not to uncover the nakedness of your father, nor the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother. You must not uncover her nakedness.

You are not to uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness.

The man who lies with his father’s wife has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them must surely be put to death. Their blood will be upon them.

This is not talking about walking into the dressing room at the beach and seeing someone naked. “Uncover their nakedness” is a euphemism for “having sexual relations”. These verses in Leviticus address exactly what was happening in Corinth. God considered this so serious that He proscribed the death penalty for both participants.

Corinthian Culture

It’s hard for us to fathom the insanity of everyday life for Gentiles in the ancient Roman empire and Corinth in particular. (At least, I hope it is well outside your experience!) We have relatively well-defined rules when it comes to sexual relations. The Greeks and Romans – not so much. A famous Greek saying was: “Prostitutes we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body and wives to bear us legitimate children and be guardians of our homes.” What?! Even though these ideas can melt our brains, this was all legal and culturally acceptable in Corinth. Concubines were even mentioned on family tombstones alongside the wife and children. Misogynistic? Totally! (Women began their ascendency toward equality with Christianity, and that’s coming up in a couple of chapters.) In Corinth, the crack of dawn wasn’t even safe! Nonetheless, mothers and stepmoms were off limits. Even the ancient Roman writer and statesman Cicero said this type of incest was an incredible crime and practically unheard of. If incest was rare in the crazy Gentile culture, how was this sin even possible in the church?

We must temporarily stretch our minds to think in terms of 1st century Corinth.

1 Cor 5:11

But as it is, I am writing to you not to associate with anyone named as a brother or sister who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or verbally abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler; with such you are not to eat.

We will visit this verse later, but let’s borrow one aspect of it now. Where did God/Paul get the six sin categories (sexually immoral, covetous, idolater, verbally abusive, drunkard, and swindler) that he highlights? From everyday life in Corinth! These sins were part of the former lifestyles of the Corinthian saints. When the sailors and travelers came to town, they visited the prostitutes, er, I mean the “Aphrodite priestesses”. There were thousands of them. Sexual immorality and idolatry were big business. The legitimate merchants, like the Jews (Paul and Aquilla made and sold tents) and the illegitimate, like the swindlers, strove to drain every shekel from the traveler. Greed was their creed. The language was abusive as it usually is in a port city when the citizenry rarely sees the same visitors twice. Also, one form of port city chicanery is universal and timeless – getting the sailors drunk and swindling them of their money. The competition in Corinth was between the prostitutes, swindlers and the legit businesses to see who could get the most money off the travelers. It seemed like everyone was screwing everybody – literally and figuratively. So, what’s the big deal about a couple of teenagers doing what teenagers often do?

It's Just a Little Incest

First off, the woman was married… to the guy’s dad! What does their relationship do to the institution of marriage? It publicly thrashes it! Not good. Secondly, what do you think this does to the guy’s family? His brothers and sisters see him having relations with their new mom. Yuck! Thirdly, what about dad? Remember him? He went out after their mom died and wooed another suitable wife/mother, paid her dowry to her parents, and married her to have a family again. And the son “steals her” away from dad and the rest of the family! What a mess! And fourthly, the dad and son (and probably the rest of the family, too) were saved. How do we know that? Because the apostle Paul is commanding him as if he were a member of the church – because he was! Dad is mentioned not in this epistle, but he is in the next one to the Corinthians.

2 Cor 7:12

So although I wrote to you, I did not write for the sake of the one who did the wrong [the son who had a sexual relationship with his step mother], nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong [his dad], but for the sake that your diligence on our behalf would be made plain to you in the sight of God.

Paul addressed both the son and the dad because both were saved church members. And the fifth reason that what the young couple was doing was wrong is… BECAUSE THE CREATOR OF THE HEANENS AND EARTH SAYS SO! For believers, if God says it, that should settle it. And we should do it. The young couple weren’t obeying and that became a further problem. This fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians deals with 2 sins – #1. the sexual immorality of the couple and #2. the church’s response. Now, let’s discuss problem #2.

1 Cor. 5:2

And you are puffed up! Should you not rather have mourned? Let him who has done this deed be removed from among you.

All three words “you” are plural in the Greek. It refers to the church, whose shocking reaction to the sexual sin was pride. I can see two possible reasons why this was. Let’s assume that the divisions in the Corinthian church (“I am of Paul”, “I am of Apollos”, etc.) had openly rivalry. If the man and his stepmother were members of one of the factions, the others could develop false pride in saying something like, “Look at the Apollos group. They have sexual weirdos in the group. We are so much better than them!” This possible wrong reaction would be addressed later in the epistle…

1 Cor. 13:6

[Love] does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth;

This is why Paul suggested that their reaction should have been mourning, not pride. Christians shouldn’t use sin as a weapon against others. We should strive for our brother’s and sister’s restoration back to righteousness and fellowship with God.

The other scenario where I could see pride developing regarding the sinning couple is this. When all these wild and wooly Corinthians were saved, they had been through a lot of sin. They were probably sexually active since they could be. Historians estimate that on average, each member of Rome's urban population (man, woman or child) consumed half a liter (about 17 ounces) of undiluted wine daily. The lower class constantly hustled (male and female prostitution, swindling, etc.) to keep body and soul together. Although they were ignorant of the Mosaic Law, all humans knew instinctively the basics of the 10 commandments - lying, swindling (stealing), sexual immorality, murder, etc. was wrong. When they heard the gospel – that Jesus forgave their sins through his sacrifice – they were amazed that they could be forgiven for so much. The custom was at that time for the new believers to get water baptized, publicly confess their sins and then get baptized in the holy spirit – manifesting the spirit. This is what the man and his dad did, joining the assembly of the saints in Corinth. This probably occurred when Paul was still there. Perhaps the dad’s wife and young man’s mom died afterward. Then the dad got a new bride and later the incestuous relationship began.

‘Love Wins’

The saints were justly proud of Jesus’s forgiveness of sins and their opportunity of a new beginning. They were proud of the love of Jesus as being bigger than their sins. I assume that the sinning couple was confronted regarding their relationship but shrugged it off. Then the church as a group was confronted by a decision – What do we do with these guys and their public relationship? I assume the young fellow publicly confessed his true love and commitment to his paramour and she to him also. They were probably sincerely ‘in love’ as teenagers can be, but they were wrong as snow in June. The church perhaps decided to use their relationship as a witness to the world of Jesus’ grace over sin. “See, Jesus can forgive even this!” perhaps they said. They were proud of their living example of “Jesus’ love overcoming sin and causing more love.” Perhaps someone said, “Dad, be tolerant as Jesus was with you, and lovingly forgive your son and your (ex) wife!” Holy linguini! How our minds can twist to rationalize sin! But … what’s God’s perspective?

1 Cor. 5:3-5

For I truly, being absent in body but present in spirit, have already, just as if I were present, judged him who has done this thing.

When you, and my spirit, are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

you are to hand over such a one to the Adversary for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus.

This last sentence has caused a stir in theological circles as to what it means. The answer is simple – remove him outside the love and grace in the church, i.e., withdraw fellowship privileges from him. The wording is figurative and instructive. “Hand over such a one to the Adversary” means to exit him from the love and protection of the church to the Adversary’s “care” in the world. He who ‘steal, kills, and destroys’ only cares about the “destruction of the flesh”. The sin and resistance to correction of the young couple needed to be disconnected from the physical, emotional and spiritual support of the Christian church. They needed to be ostracized by the Gentile community for their bizarre coupling. They needed a pin to pop their self-esteem, “love conquers all” balloon and Satan was, of course, more than willing to provide it. You will see in the second epistle to the Corinthians that this guy repents and get’s it together, so this prescription of separation was more than just wise – it worked! Why? Because Dr. Jesus proscribed it!

Matthew 18:15-17

“And if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault—just between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

But if he does not hear you, take with you one or two more, so that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every word can be established.

And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the congregation, and if he also refuses to hear the congregation, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector.

Here are the biblical “due process” steps for reconciling sinners in the church.

1. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault—just between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.
2. “But if he does not hear you, take with you one or two more, so that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every word can be established.
3. “And if he refuses to hear them” … then start bragging on them to others? Of course not. This is where the Corinthian saints blew it. They quit confronting the wayward couple. They needed to carry out the third and fourth process. “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the congregation.”
4. “And if he also refuses to hear the congregation, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector.” Let the world pound some sense into him through experiencing the consequences of his sin. Instead of a loving group of supporting brothers and sisters, let him come home to an empty apartment or a bunch of knuckleheads at the corner saloon, who mock the ‘MF’er’. Sorry, but that’s what Corinthians would do. Verbal abuse was a sport to them. “Welcome back to the world, kid!”

According to Acts 18 the Corinthian church was a mix of Jews and Gentiles. A church attendee consorting with his father’s wife would have made one of the Jewish convert’s head almost explode. To them, that’s a death penalty sin. I assume that someone in the Corinthian church confronted the guy individually and then with a couple of others, but regrettably, they quit there. They allowed the sin to stand and that was a problem.

1 Cor. 5:6-8

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?

Clean out the old leaven, so that you can be a new lump, just as you really are unleavened. For indeed, Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

So then, 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.

Need more physical analogies of spiritual truths? Here’s another one. Leaven is like yeast, which when mixed in bread dough, spreads to every part and causes it to rise and enhance taste. When God instituted the Passover, he required Israel use unleavened bread. So, to make unleavened bread, you had to get rid of any old leaven in the bread making area or the new bread could be contaminated by the yeast and spread throughout, making the unleavened bread, leavened. The analogy is clear. We must get rid of the “malicious wicked leaven” so that we can live uncompromisingly “sincerely true”.

Now think about the analogy. The problem is not the bread, it’s the leaven. Similarly, the problem is not the couple, it’s the sin. The church must take a stand against the sin and remove it from where the saints are (like bread) being formed, figuratively speaking. The points is – the sin (like the leaven) must go! The couple can let go of the sin, repent and be restored, or they can choose to leave with the departing sin, but the sin must go! Those that have the sin get to choose their location - to stay with righteousness in the church or go with the exiting sin into the world. The point is – get rid of the sin!

Now let’s take the analogy another step further. What’s unique to leaven? It has yeast in it which is active (alive) cultures. In other words, it is alive. What’s the problem with sin in the church? It can infect and effect everyone. Why? Because it can (and does) bring life with it. What kind of life could it be? Take a guess! This is how Satan infiltrates, then tries to permeate and then ultimately attempts to dominate.

The world tells us to be tolerant - and we should be tolerant of each other and our insignificant differences. You like chocolate, baseball and Republicans and I like strawberry, football and Independents. So what? Those things are insignificant. Why? When Christ comes back there will be no ice cream, sports, or politics! But when it comes to sin and righteousness, obedience or disobedience to God’s will, these are not insignificant. Tolerance to sin equals tolerance to evil and Satan. And no amount of rationalization makes it right or eliminates the consequences. Sure, at first there may be little or no consequences, but it takes a while for the leaven to spread throughout the dough. Soon enough, you’re baked! Infiltrated, permeated, then dominated. Here’s the answer – accentuate Jesus, eliminate and exterminate sin and Satan! Then, celebrate!

Part of growing up in Christ entails the realization that repenting from sin at the new birth is not the end of eradicating sin in our lives, it’s the beginning. We are delivered from Satan’s dominance in our lives … unless we give him place. Freedom from sin at salvation is great but it is an ongoing process that we walk through with the lord as he reveals it to us. The sinning young guy probably thought he was doing no wrong. He had never been “in love” so deeply and it “felt so right”! I appreciate that but we are to live by faith, not feelings. And …

Rom. 10:17 KJV

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

When our feelings say one thing and the word of God says the opposite, what do we do and who do we trust? The baby Christian learns their feeling may lie, but God doesn’t.

1 Cor. 5:9,10

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people,

not at all meaning with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, since then you would have an obligation to go out of the world.

Wait a second! Paul wrote a previous letter? Yes. Where is it? Only God knows. The first epistle to the Corinthians was not the first one chronologically, but the first one in the Bible.

1 Cor. 5:11-13

But as it is, I am writing to you not to associate with anyone named as a brother or sister who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or verbally abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler; with such you are not to eat.

For what have I to do with judging those who are outside the church? Aren’t you supposed to judge those who are inside the Church?

But those who are outside God judges. Remove the wicked person from among yourselves!

Can you imagine if God asked us not to associate with any sinners? How could we work? I don’t know about you, but I’ve worked with many chronic sinners over the years. I would have starved while looking for a workplace free from spiritual craziness. God doesn’t tell us to avoid a brother or sister who just sins, but one “who is” (present tense and active voice in the Greek – meaning someone who is currently and actively involved in the six sins mentioned). What does this mean? It means you don’t avoid someone who gets drunk and stupid and repents, or someone who commits an act of dishonesty and confesses and forsakes it, returning to honest dealings. We are to avoid those that have two competing identities – a Christian drunk, a saint swindler, or a greedy saved person. The point is, we all mess up. God want us to grow up…and make sin rare, not righteousness rare. He wants us to be in the habit of goodness with the regrettable occasional misstep of evil. The church helps us with that…if we will confront unrepentant evil when we see it. And help our brothers or sisters back to fellowship and the great benefits Christ earned and gave us.

When you read 2 Corinthians, you realize the ostracization of the sinning young man worked. He repented and came back to the church and sanity. Funny thing about the word of God. It works when we do it. It rarely does when we don’t. God encourages us…



1 Cor. 5:5 you are to hand over such a one to the Adversary for the destruction of the flesh, **so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus.**

“Flesh” is the figure of speech metonymy for “the desires of the flesh,” or the carnal nature. That use of “flesh” is very common in the writings of Paul (cf. Rom. 8:8; 2 Cor. 10:2; Gal. 5:13, 19; Eph. 2:3; Phil. 1:22; Col. 2:23). The person is excommunicated from the Church and put out into the world, where he is unloved, and (hopefully) his fleshly desires will come to an end (be destroyed) as he comes to realize the value of Christian fellowship. Thus his “spirit” (his attitude toward God and thus his rewards), “may” (the subjunctive expresses the possibility) be saved when Christ returns. The word “saved” is in the subjunctive mood, expressing the possibility that putting someone out of the church “may” bring him to repentance, but there are people who leave the Church and never repent, but become very worldly. God, however, opts for the greater possibility and expresses His desire for the person. Instead of kicking him out and saying he “may” stay worldly, He says that he “may” yet regain his Christian attitude and rewards.

The Roman world was very harsh and cruel, which made the commands to Christians to be especially kind one to another, loving, and hospitable stand out even more strongly in Roman times than they do today. Christian fellowship with like-minded loving believers was a safe harbor and a blessed place to be in contrast to the Roman world, which could “destroy” the “flesh”—the fleshly worldly mind—fairly quickly. Paul speaks of the many dangers he faced as he traveled in the Roman world (2 Cor. 11:26) and how he was often tired, hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, cold, and treated badly (1 Cor. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 11:27), and he had loving Christians to support him. A person who got ejected from Christian fellowship and thus had no loving support could have his fleshly attitude “destroyed” by the world quite quickly and repent and return to the church so that his mental state—his attitudes, thoughts, and emotions—are restored. The “destruction” of the flesh does not refer to destruction in the sense of the person’s death, although many commentators think that is its meaning. A person’s death does not result in his “spirit” being saved. When a person’s flesh is “destroyed” and he could be weak, sick, hungry, and uncared for, that state of want and need can cause a person to rethink life, repent, and attempt to return to better circumstances, in this case, back into the church **and Christian belief.**

so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus.” The word “spirit” (Greek: pneuma) has many different uses in the New Testament, and here in this phrase, it refers to a person’s mental state: the thoughts and emotions. In this verse, it means that a person’s mental state may be made whole, and thus be that way in the Day of the Lord. The phrase here in 1 Corinthians 5:5, “so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus” has engendered much discussion. However, the word “spirit” had already been used twice in the immediately preceding verses (1 Cor. 5:3-4), and there is no demanding reason that the meaning of “spirit” should suddenly change here; in fact, the same use of spirit—the activities of the mind such as thoughts, attitudes, and emotions—fits as well in 1 Corinthians 5:5 as it does in 1 Corinthians 5:3-4.

The word “saved” is the Greek word sōzō (#4982 σῴζω), and it has many meanings, including to rescue from danger or destruction, to keep safe, to heal, to make whole, and to save from everlasting destruction. In this case, the evidence is that sōzō has the meaning of “to heal, to be made whole.” There are a number of reasons to come to that conclusion. One is, as has been pointed out, that in the immediate context the word “spirit” refers to the activities of the mind—one’s attitude, thoughts, and emotions—and those things are not “saved” in the sense of being given everlasting life. One’s godly mental state can be restored, healed, or made whole, but it is the person who receives everlasting life, not a person’s mental state. Also, we can see why the Bible would use “spirit” here, referring to the thoughts and emotions. The context is a man whose thinking was so unsound that he was having sex with his father’s wife. But that kind of sinful behavior based on unsound “thoughts and emotions” (the person’s “spirit”) is one of the things that was promised to be healed at the Rapture and resurrections (Isa. 32:4).

Also, although a common explanation of 1 Corinthians 5:5 is that it is the “human spirit” of a person that is “saved” (granted everlasting life), that is not what the Bible teaches. It teaches that the “person” is granted everlasting life, not any “human spirit” people may or may not have. Many verses speak of “people” being saved, and many different phrases are used to describe that fact. In contrast, there are no verses that undisputably teach that a part of a person can be saved but somehow not the other parts saved in the same way. Furthermore, at the Rapture, Christians will not have the kind of body we have now but a totally new and “complete” body like Christ’s glorious body (Phil. 3:21), we will not be partly saved or partly changed.

Another thing we should take into account is that “the Day of the Lord Jesus” may not just refer to the Day of Judgment but in fact refer to the time when the Lord rules the earth.

So the lesson of 1 Corinthians 5:5 is that if there is an egregious sinner in the Church, rather than letting the arrogant ungodly attitude of that person affect the whole Church, put the person out of the fellowship in the hope that his “flesh,” his sinful behavior and thoughts, will be destroyed and that his “spirit,” his attitude and emotions will thus be whole in the Day of the Lord Jesus.