

CLEANING HOUSE

1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-12

In an article entitled, “[Moments Of Startling Clarity](#),” Dr. Stephen Anderson writes of an experience he had while teaching a HS senior-level, philosophy class.

He was beginning a new unit on “ethics” and needed an “*attention-grabber*” - something that would shock his students, and force them to take a moral position.

He wanted to find a ground zero on which they all agreed. Then from that starting point the class could discuss the legitimacy of other moral judgments.

He decided to display a picture, without comment.

The photo was of Bibi Aisha, an Afghani teen who was forced to marry an abusive Taliban fighter. He kept her with his animals, and treated her as one of them.

When Bibi tried to escape, she was caught. Her tormentor chopped off her nose and ears, and left her for dead. She was taken to an American hospital, where her life was saved... *It was obvious the students were moved by her photo. Some couldn't bear to look.*

Anderson said he felt the awful treatment of a girl so near the age of his students would be enough to induce a clear ethical outrage from his class. *But the teacher wasn't prepared for the student's response...*

Dr. Anderson writes, "They became confused. The students seemed not to know what to think. They spoke timidly, afraid to make any moral judgment at all.

They were unwilling to criticize any situation originating in a different culture. They said, "Well, we might not like it, but maybe over there it's okay." Another said, "It's just wrong to judge other cultures..."

No matter how I prodded they wouldn't leave their nonjudgmental position. I left that class shaking my head. It seemed clear to me that for some students... the lesson is acceptance of all things at all costs...

Anderson concludes, "The overriding message is *"never judge, never criticize, never take a position."*

This is what's happened today in western civilization.

Tolerance has run amok. It's filleted our backbone. We no longer know if there even is a right and wrong.

People are so indoctrinated with moral relativism, they're unable - *and afraid* - to refer to evil as "evil," even when it's so brazen as to slap them in the face.

GK Chesterton wrote, "Tolerance is the virtue of the man who has lost his convictions." And we've lost ours.

Having tossed aside our Bible - without instructions from the Creator, no one today has the moral authority to render a judgment, even in the face of blatant evil.

The only thing modern man is sure of is that he's not so sure. There is no longer an ethical high ground.

I like how Dorothy Sayers put it, "In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair, the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die..." Tolerance adds to our emptiness.

If everything and everybody is right, then there is no real right and wrong. If all things matter equally - then nothing really matters. Life becomes hopeless.

It's tragic enough that this fog of tolerance governs the secular domain - *but God forbid that it becomes the norm in the church.* We need Christian leaders in the church who are not afraid to stand on biblical principle, and refuse to succumb to the mood of the culture.

We mentioned earlier that the church in Corinth was like a ship on a vast ocean. The Corinthians were a tiny outpost in an idolatrous and promiscuous culture.

And that was fine. Ships are made to be in the water (*God would keep the Corinthians afloat*), but water isn't suppose to get into the ship... A boat that springs a leak is in trouble. This was the case with the church at Corinth. In chapters 5-7 Paul plugs the leaks.

Chapter 5 begins with Paul addressing a shocking problem in this church... He writes in verse 1, **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles - that a man has his father’s wife!”**

A member of the church was shacking up with his father’s wife - *his step-mother!... It was creepy...*

This was the sort of tale you’d sooner see on [The Jerry Springer Show](#) than in the church of Jesus Christ. We’re talking raunchy, sordid - trailer trash antics.

A man's wife and son had conspired to betray him. They'd moved in together. It was adultery. And to top it off, the son was broadcasting that he was a Christian.

Certainly, the Bible prohibits incest.

Leviticus 18:7-8 not only forbid having sex with “**your mother,**” but with “**your father’s wife**” - as was the case here in Corinth... Deuteronomy 27:20 says it plainly, “**Cursed is the one who lies with his father’s wife.**”

Yet not only did the Bible prohibit this coupling, Paul says this kind of sexual immorality “**is not even named among the Gentiles,**” and that was saying something...

The Roman world tolerated all kinds of debauchery and perversion. Neither Greek or Roman culture had any expectation of sexual purity. *When and with whom* you had sex only mattered to the Jews and Christians.

Yet incest was beyond even pagan bounds. It was so twisted it didn’t even make sense to amoral minds.

And notice the expression, “**has his father’s wife.**” It refers to a continuous state - a permanent relationship.

This wasn’t just two people getting drunk at the family reunion and waking up the next morning in a compromised position... *slinking off in shame.*

This man knew exactly what he was doing! He’d crossed a line that in the eyes of God and man was uncrossable. In denial of God’s Word - even the mores’ of

his own culture - he'd convinced himself he was right and he wanted everyone else to applaud his lifestyle - to agree with him that what he was doing was okay.

This man was *coming to church, worshipping God, taking communion, probably sitting on the front row...*

It's interesting, Paul never addresses the woman.

The implication is that she was not a Christian, and not a member of the church, but the man was a fixture. We don't know, but he could've even been an usher!

Bible Commentator, Alan Redpath, translates the phrase in verse 1, "*It is actually reported,*" as "It is commonly reported..." or "It is everywhere noised abroad..." In short, "This is the talk of the town!"

Everyone in the city of Corinth knew of this situation.

Paul mourns. The pagan community is appalled. The only folks happy about it was the Corinthian church.

Here Paul isn't just upset over the sin in the camp, he's asking this church, "Doesn't anyone see that this is staining our reputation? This is wilting our witness?"

He writes to them in verse 2, “And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.”

Again, worse than the sin itself, was the church's attitude toward this sin. They were not only tolerating this awful immorality, but were proud of their tolerance.

You can hear the Corinthian's boast, "Jesus said, '*Judge not that you be not judged.*' Far be it from us to tell someone else what's right and wrong. We teach grace!" It sounds like a 21st century rationalization.

I like how Peterson paraphrases verses 1-2, "One of your men is sleeping with his stepmother, and you're so above it all that it doesn't even faze you! Shouldn't this break your hearts? Shouldn't it bring you to your knees in tears? Shouldn't this person and his conduct be confronted and dealt with?" The church was proud of their tolerance. They should've been *mourning*...

The Greek word translated, "*mourned*" in verse 2, is the same word used for grieving the dead. The church in Corinth should've viewed this situation as **a loss** - *of virtue, of purity, of integrity, of holiness, of witness.*

Instead the believers in Corinth were *patting themselves on the back*... when they should've been *falling on their knees, and getting in this man's face.*

Paul adds in verse 3, “For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed.” Notice, *without speaking to this man personally. Without sitting down with him, and hearing his heart. Without listening to his rationalizations,* Paul was able to render a verdict in this case. It was open and shut!

Without being present in body, or on the scene in person, Paul could judge... because *the Spirit of God, the Word of God, the Son of God* had already judged.

When our Lord Jesus told us, “Judge not that you be not judged,” He wasn’t referring to all judgments.

In the very same passage, Matthew 7:15, Jesus told us, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

Hey, the false prophet doesn’t go around wearing a name tag, “Hello, I’m a wolf!” So how do we identify him? Jesus tells us, “You will know them by their fruits.”

Some form of judgment is necessary. Truly, it’s not for us to judge a man’s motive, or calling, or attitude - but we can examine his deeds... *we can inspect fruit.*

Back in 4:5 Paul had warned the Corinthians not to make superfluous judgments of another man's ministry.

But there was nothing superficial or trivial about this judgment. This was not an issue of culture or personal preference. This was not a gray matter. God addresses this in black and white - the Bible had already judged.

Here was a couple living in blatant immorality - Paul says it's *high time* for the church to deal with their sin.

I hope none of us are waiting on a Bible upgrade. Realize, God isn't on the verge of releasing "*Bible 2.0.*"

God's Word needs no upgrades or updates.

The Bible is timeless. It might be difficult for our rebel hearts to obey, but the Bible speaks truth to every age.

The Church at Corinth was either ignorant of God's Word, or they'd watered it down, or they were playing dumb, but as Christians they were on the hook to obey!

Here's a truth, you can't tolerate what God labels sin, and claim to love God. If I love God, I'll rejoice in what brings Him joy, and mourn over what causes Him grief.

Neither can I ignore sin, yet say I love others. Sin is sin because it's harmful. It damages us and others.

Understand, not one of the prohibitions in your Bible is there just to prove Who's boss. God is not on an ego trip. He doesn't throw His weight around to make a point. When He says "no" it's for our own good. He loves us. All God's prohibitions are for our protection.

I hope you know, [pleasing God is also good for us!](#)

Why is it, we think **tolerance** is a loving virtue, while **intolerance** is cruel, and mean, and prejudicial?

What kind of love is it that tolerates what's harmful and evil? If I really love someone I'll be intolerant of what's detrimental to their spiritual and physical health.

In fact, we're intolerant all the time in our society!

You can't drink alcohol and drive a school bus... You can't text while you drive...
How intolerant is that!

But how can it be "loving" to tolerate and encourage an act that God says is injurious to you and to society?

If the leaders of CC condoned immorality or tolerated false doctrine - if we didn't speak up and oppose what God says is wrong - then we'd be guilty of malpractice.

Here's an interesting comparison... Tolerance says, *"You must approve of what I do."* But Love replies, *"I must do something harder; I will love you, even when I disapprove of your behavior, and it offends me."*

Tolerance says, *"You must agree with me."* But Love replies, *"I'll do something harder; I'll tell you the truth, even if you don't like me afterwards, because I'm convinced it's the truth that will set you free."*

Tolerance says, *"You must allow me to go my way."* Love replies, *"I must do something harder; I'll risk our friendship and plead with you to follow the **right way.**"*

This week I went to the doctor for my annual exam. *I passed.* The Doc told me I could lose a little weight, but other than that, the EKG and blood work were A-OK.

But what if there had been a problem? Yet the doctor lied to me, *"Sandy, you're a perfect specimen."* Then I walked out the door and killed over of a heart attack.

Kathy would be mad. At least, *she'd want her money back for the bogus physical... credit her Visa Card.*

Imagine, this doctor on the witness stand being grilled by Kathy's attorney, *"Sandy was one jelly doughnut shy of the big one and you said he was OK?"*

The doctor answers, *"Well, when I go negative and tell folks they're sick, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want my office to be a safe place where people feel loved and accepted."*

The attorney would challenge him. *"How can you call it **love**, if you ignore the problems of at-risk patients?"*

This doctor would be guilty of violating his oath.

And that is exactly what some pastors and churches are doing today - *violating their oath*. Rather than tell people the truth, the goal is to avoid offending anyone.

Too many pastors and churches soften up Scripture, and placate sinners - *rather than shoot straight*.

Paul was no advocate of *spineless spirituality*. Because he loved God and because he truly loved people he wasn't afraid to *stand up* where *God takes a stand* - and *speak up* where *God has clearly spoken*.

Today's church needs to follow Paul's example. The Corinthians weakened their witness because they tolerated immorality. Church discipline was needed.

In verse 4 Paul issues a formal command to the Corinthians, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

Let me reiterate, this was not a struggling believer who'd admitted his sin, yet was still mired down in the process of untangling a twisted situation. If that were the case, Paul would've had empathy and offered help.

We're all struggling sinners learning to live free.

If that had been the case, Paul would've suggested a different remedy. He would've wanted the Corinthians to be long-suffering and merciful to this man.

But that was not the situation. Here was a Christian who'd deliberately chosen to ignore God's Word and live in open defiance to God's will. This was intolerable!

The man living with his stepmom wasn't trying to *untangle* from the world and run to the Lord, he was trying to *entangle* the church with the evil of this world.

I don't know about you, but when I get to church I've had enough of this world! Its lifestyles and attitudes weary me. I long for an environment where the focus is heaven! [Why go to a church that wants to be like the world?](#) The church needs to be an oasis in the desert - a respite from this world - not a reflection of its evil.

It was time for the church in Corinth to clean house.

In Matthew 18 Jesus laid out church discipline in three steps. He told His disciples, if a brother sins, another brother should go to him, and seek to restore him... If he refuses to listen, then the guy who went should return with two or three brothers - try again...

But if the man refuses to hear the two or three, then he should be brought before the whole church, and encouraged to repent... And if that final step also fails to convince him - then he should get the boot...

You've heard of the *right hand of Christian fellowship*? There's also the *right foot of dis-fellowship*.

Yet Jesus was clear the goal at each stage of church discipline is to bring the defiant brother to repentance. Even if he's booted from the Body, he's being *"delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh."*

And that's not *his life*, but *his sinful tendencies*. His *"flesh"* is his independent,

stubborn, selfish attitude. It's the "*I know best...*" "*I can do it on my own...*" approach.

His flesh needs to be destroyed, *better yet crucified!*

Paul is saying if he wants to do it by himself, let him have at it for awhile! Let him taste the consequences of his sinful choices. If it's sin he wants, give him his fill.

The prodigal son realized the error of his ways not in his father's house, but slopping hogs in the pig pen.

Apparently, when a person is part of a church family certain protections are inherent. You're surrounded by support, encouragement, resources... To a degree the church shelters you from the real magnitude of sin.

A person's connections to the Body of Christ - even if they're tenuous - still provide a spiritual buffer.

Remember, Satan couldn't attack Job with the heavy artillery until God had removed His hedge of protection.

Satan is a cruel taskmaster. His only desire is to steal, kill, and destroy. But he's somewhat restricted as long as a person remains part of the Body of Christ.

It's church discipline that removes the safety net. He hits rock bottom. She's now got to deal with her stuff.

Paul's wise and loving advice was to turn this man out into the storm. Let him learn the hard way how much he needs to humble himself and submit to God.

The Church does a person a disservice when we keep them from reaping the full brunt of what they sow.

And we know this discipline worked! In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in 2:8, he asks the church to receive this man again into their fellowship.

Paul writes, "I urge you to reaffirm your love to him."

Apparently, the Corinthians obeyed Paul, and kicked this brother out... *and it had the desired effect!*

His season of separation brought about an attitude of repentance. Church discipline is never easy, but it's necessary - *and it often achieves the desired results.*

In verse 6 Paul addresses how prideful the Corinthians had been regarding their tolerance, "Your glorying is not good." The blatant sin allowed in Corinth wasn't *pleasing to God*, and it wasn't *loving to man*.

If your son is allergic to bee stings, and you love your son, then you're not going to be real fond of bees.

Paul knew it's impossible for us to be *for God* - and to *love people* - without also being *against sin*.

He warns us in verse 6, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” Leaven or yeast is what causes bread to rise. It influences by puffing up, and that's why throughout the Bible leaven serves as a type of sin. This is what sin does... *it inflates our pride*.

Sin starts out small, but it works beneath the surface. It eventually permeates and sours the whole lump.

Sin is like a cancer in the Body of Christ - blatant sin is a malignancy that if allowed to spread can destroy the whole body. Hypocrisy sours the life of a church.

This is why, like cancer, stubborn sins need to be detected early, and cut out. Allow rebellion to linger, let it form a precedent, watch it get into the blood stream of a church, and the damage can be irreparable.

The worst approach to cancer is **tolerance**. *“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”* And the same is true of unrepentant sin. Deal with it before it metastasizes.

There’s an African saying... *“An injury to the head, is an injury to the whole person, is an injury to the whole family, is an injury to the compound, is an injury to the village, is an injury to the kingdom, is an injury to the world.”* When churches tolerate blatant sin it taints and discredits us all. It’s a poor witness to the world.

“Therefore (verse 7) purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened.” Here’s a reference to the Jewish Passover. Each year Jews the world over celebrate their exodus from Egypt. They gather around the table to eat lamb, and engage in a ceremony full of meaning.

The expression, *“purge out the old leaven”* speaks to one aspect of this ritual... A week prior to the Passover all the leaven in the household is collected and burned.

The house is **“cleansed”** or *“purged”* of leaven. All the corrupting influences are removed from the house.

So on that special night when the family sits down to eat of the lamb that was slaughtered for their salvation, they can do so free from any contaminating influences. They want their worship to be heartfelt and genuine.

And this is how we as Christians should live life. **“For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.”**

Passover is a type of Jesus. His blood was spilled so our sin could be pardoned. Judgment passes over us.

Now we in the Church should sit down with our family to enjoy our salvation. But only after we’ve rid our house of the leaven of hypocrisy and rebellion.

Verse 8, **“Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.”**

Then Paul pens, verse 9, **“I wrote to you in my epistle...”** There had been a previous letter from Paul.

We call the epistle we're reading, **“First Corinthians,”** but it could’ve been **“Second Corinthians”** or **“Third Corinthians.”** We just know there was a predecessor.

The most readily available form of communication in the Roman world of the first century was *the courier*.

The **Pax Romana**, or “**Peace of Rome**,” guaranteed safe roads and travel. Couriers were able to shuttle letters back and forth across the empire. This allowed the apostles to stay in touch with the churches they planted - *answering questions, resolving controversies*.

Some of the letters were specific to time and place. Other letters were universal - applying to *all the Church in every era*. Those letters now make up the NT.

A few Bible commentators suggest **2 Corinthians 6:14 - 7:1** is Paul’s missing letter here... Others have concluded it was a correspondence that’s been lost.

Either way, Paul tells us what was relevant in this previous letter. He had written, “**not to keep company with sexually immoral people.**” **Bad company corrupts good morals...** *But here Paul qualifies his concern...*

He writes now in verse 10, “**Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with**

the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner - not even to eat with such a person.”

The Corinthians had it backwards. These believers were turning up their noses at their *heathen neighbors*, while ignoring the *hypocrisy within their own ranks*.

Paul tells the church not to shun the person who's lost in his sin. Jesus was called "a friend of sinners." And in that spirit He wants us to *build bridges, cultivate friendships, and find common ground* with lost people.

The phrase Paul uses in verse 9, "to *keep company*" literally means "to *mingle*." If by not mingling with the sexually immoral, Paul meant the pagans in town, then the Christians would have had to drop out of society.

Again, everybody in Corinth was

sexually immoral.

The hill of Aphrodite was just above the city. Every night Temple prostitutes came down from the mountain and plied their trade in the city's streets. Illicit sex was part of the worship of Corinth... Your child's *public school teacher, his baseball coach, the councilman, the guys on your bowling team* - didn't raise an eyebrow at going to the city square on Friday night and spending an hour with a prostitute. It was a way of life in Corinth.

Paul didn't want to create a distance between the Christians and unbelievers, Paul hoped the believers in Corinth would shine their light into the dark. Mix and mingle with the pagans. Point them in a new direction.

The person the Corinthians needed to avoid wasn't *the rowdy sinner*, but *the rebellious saint*. It was the brother who was living a bogus brand of Christianity.

The danger to this church's health wasn't rubbing up against the *corrupt*, but hanging out with the *carnal*.

It's sad, but down through the centuries, the church has made a habit of picking the wrong friends.

We buddy up to hypocrites - people we ought to shun... while we keep our distance from the folks who need us most. We're guilty of unhealthy isolationism.

In Byzantine and Medieval times serious, spiritually-driven Christians, cloistered away in monasteries. They

separated from the world to try and please to God. **Yet what pleases God most is not *isolation*, but *infiltration*.**

No matter how dark the world grows, or how raunchy the world gets - we should never see the lost world around us as our enemy, **it's our mission field**. Our enemy is *the hypocrite within*, not *the heathen without*.

When the Church views the people God wants us to reach as the enemy, we become worthless to God.

When we come out of the world and come to Christ, we're not suppose to slam the door behind us. We're suppose to turn around - with love and a helping hand.

But that's not what happens with

some Christians.

Saints become snobs. Immoral people, irreligious people get the impression the church is a club for the clean-cuts, rather than a hospital for the messed-ups.

I've heard a sad statistic... **By the time a person has been a Christian for two years, usually he or she has lost all meaningful relationships with unbelievers.** For all practical purposes it's an inadvertent monasticism.

After a few years our whole life revolves around the church, and Christians, and Christian stuff. We lose opportunities to hone friendships with non-Christians.

Don't misunderstand, I believe in the importance of Christian fellowship, but

when you're *connecting to a church* it doesn't mean you *disconnect from the world*.

We become so worried and fearful about the world infecting us with evil that we don't cultivate opportunities where we can impact society for good.

It's just easier to hang out with Christians in a temptation-free environment, than it is to rub shoulders with lost people - especially on their own turf.

That would be risky... That's like Jesus leaving heaven and coming to earth... or it's like the Christian who took the risk and reached out to you... Maybe its time some of us stop playing it safe and take a risk!

Our enemy is not the sinner without Jesus. He or she can't change if they wanted to - they lack the power.

Our nemesis - *the greatest threat to our faith* - is the person who claims to know Jesus, yet holds on to his or her sin with no desire to change. Paul says the church's health, and our witness to the community, is better served if we shun the *hypocrite* until he repents.

Verse 12, "For what *have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."*

I get weary of pastors who're always railing on the ungodly. They're always on a soap box pointing out what's

wrong with the world. *But what do we expect?*

Why would we expect sinners not to sin? Why would we expect a lost world not to act lost and confused?

I'm not surprised by the craziness in this world, or even appalled by it. The world is lost. Most people don't know God or His truth, They're not firing on all cylinders. They've got a life, but lack the instructions.

Our place is not to judge this lost world, but to love and reach people for Jesus. Introduce them to their Creator and Savior... *They'll get judged soon enough.*

If the church wants to judge someone, we need to judge ourselves! Once we've cleaned up our house,

then we'll be a more a winsome and effective witness.

And when the living Lord does return to judge this wicked world; hopefully, there'll be fewer folks to judge!