

2/1 First Corinthians 5-8

The philosophical backdrop for these chapters has to do with how the Corinthians viewed the body. Some viewed the body as evil, and thought Christians should only focus on spiritual pursuits and neglect the flesh altogether. Others, thought that Christians had ultimate freedom since they had been freed from the power of the law, and that the body was inconsequential (neither bad nor good), and as a result saw no problem with behaving in ways that were physically self-destructive (and destructive to others in the case of sexual impropriety). They thought the body didn't matter at all and that Jesus was coming back any day, so they could just behave however they wanted to. In fact, they believed that this attitude made them MORE spiritual than those who rejected bodily activities outright as evil. In these chapters, Paul is saying that both of those perspectives are wrong.

Chapter 5

Now Paul unleashes the reports that he's received from Chloe's people and those who brought letters to him. Paul may be far away, but he has the real dirt and needs to address it. The sexual immorality that Paul finds most damaging to the Christian community is that of an incestuous relationship between son and step-mother (or God forbid, between son and birth mother), which Paul says is worse than anything that the pagans find appropriate to engage in. This person was still an active part of the assembly, and likely would have been saying things to the rest of the congregation like, "It doesn't matter what my sex life is like because Jesus is coming soon and doesn't care about my body. I'm holier than the rest of you because I'm proving that I don't care about the body, only the spirit." This is the arrogance that Paul is speaking out against. What's more, it seems like at least some in the assembly agreed with this person and rather than mourning, celebrated this relationship. Paul is angry and renders judgment in the spirit, since he is not present in the flesh. He urges the assembly to follow Matthew 18:20 and to cast the man out of their midst (though it's very important to note that Paul takes a significantly harsher stance than Jesus, who left room for repentance and reconciliation, and when we read scripture Jesus' own words always outrank those of Paul). Paul quotes Jesus' words against the Pharisees (almost ironically, since the Pharisees were too stringent in their obedience to the law) "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" to suggest that this relationship and this person spouting false understanding of the gospel is dangerous for the community. For the budding congregation full of "babies in the faith" it was dangerous to have someone sowing such false teaching. Paul didn't want the whole congregation to ascribe to the incestuous person's ideology. This is why Paul comes down so harshly and calls for essentially excommunication. This is also why Paul is so protective of who he wants his baby church to eat with and associate with. Though, again, it's important to note that Jesus himself ate with sinners and calls his established (non-baby) church to do the same. If the church refused to associate with those on Paul's list of sinners it would be empty, for certainly at the very least every one of us has fallen short in the idolatry department. We've all put our faith and trust in something that is not God. This is a tension in our faith, Christ calls us to be a place of open welcome and healing for sinners (which is all of us). But, there are some circumstances where a person's sin is extreme, harmful to

themselves and others, persistent, and where they see no need for repentance and forgiveness (think domestic abuse or a clergy sex scandal) these are the times where Paul urges the persons who have caused such harm to be cast out of the community for the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole.

Chapter 6

Paul continues confronting practical issues that he's heard have arisen within the community. Paul (believing that Jesus is returning any day) has the notion that the saints will be the ones to judge everyone else on earth. This doesn't show up anywhere else in scripture, but rather Christ is the one who judges the earth. Paul uses this imagery to suggest that Christians should solve their complaints against one another within the confines of the community. Certainly, those in the church shouldn't be doing things intentionally against others to cause complaints to arise, but if there are disputes, there should be someone wise enough to be able to settle the matter without it having to go to court.

Paul then returns to the general theme of immorality and lists in verse 11 a litany of those whom he says will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, many of which include some form of sexual immorality, sin against the body, or against the community (greed, stealing, reviling/drunks). When Paul speaks of "sodomites" in his writings it's very important that we understand specifically what he means based in the context of his own time. "Sodomites" in Paul's time were grown men who abused their power and status by keeping boys or much younger men to use and abuse as sex slaves. The co-equal, monogamous, committed same sex partnerships that exist today were not part of Paul's experience or worldview. Rather, Paul is speaking against a pervasive form of socially acceptable sexual abuse by those in power. Similarly, male prostitutes were found in pagan temples and individuals would visit male prostitutes as a form of worship of the pagan deities, and as such commit idolatry with their bodies. Paul is very concerned that God's people lead healthy sex lives and have a healthy understanding of the relationship between their bodies and their spiritual lives, but doesn't really say anything about same sex relationships in the way that we experience them in our world today. Paul begins responding to some of the excuses the Corinthians have given for their behaviors. And then reminds them that their bodies are not evil, nor are they inconsequential, but that their physical bodies are the body parts of Christ himself! Christ will raise not just our spirits, but our bodies as well –just as Christ himself was raised bodily from the dead! As such, Christians are to care lovingly for their bodies for their bodies are just as holy as the Temple in Jerusalem or the temples to the pagan deities, for Christ dwells in the Christian's body through the Holy Spirit. Fornication means any kind of sexual immorality, not just premarital sex. Christians are called to "glorify God in your body!"

Chapter 7

Vs. 1-16, Paul addresses a number of questions about the estate of marriage and the sexual implications of marriage. Paul says that the best thing would be for everyone to remain celibate and unmarried, like Paul, but that is not possible for the majority. Martin Luther relied heavily on this chapter of Paul's writings as he was discerning whether or not priests should be allowed to marry in the reformed church. He decided

early on that priests should be allowed to marry, and that ex-nuns should be encouraged to marry, as a life of true celibacy is possible only for a very few human beings who had been granted a special dispensation of grace by God. The vast majority of humans need companionship and physical intimacy, and so Luther lifted up marriage –not religious orders- as the ideal model for living in the world, only making exceptions for those who truly have received the special grace of God (like Paul) to enjoy the celibate life to the fullest. At the time of Paul's letter to the Corinthians it would have been common for only the husband to be viewed as in charge of the wife's body, and from the Greek perspective husbands generally procreated with their wives and enjoyed sexual pleasure with their concubines, but Paul makes a radical statement that wives have authority over their husbands bodies just as husbands have authority over their wives, and that spouses should enjoy one another (and only one another) and communicate with one another about their sexual needs –and when to mutually agree that sex should be put on hold. Of course, this passage has been used to justify abuses –such as marital rape- but nothing could be further from what Paul originally intended. Paul's language about marriage is egalitarian and full of open dialogue, undergirded by love. Abuse is the opposite of the model which Paul lifts up for Christian marriage. Next, Paul addresses single people and widows, saying that if possible (since Jesus is coming soon) they should remain celibate, but if they can't then they should marry so that their passions will be fulfilled through the appropriate channels. And finally, Paul addresses divorce. He discourages Christians from seeking divorce. However, if Christians are married to non-Christians then their faith covers their spouses, but if their non-Christian spouses divorce them, they are not bound, but free to remarry. *"It is to peace that God has called you."*

Vs. 17-40, The "impending crisis" Paul is referring to is the return of the Lord. Paul expected that there would be great social and cosmic upheaval preceding the return of Christ, and so his words to "remain as you are" are a word to keep your life as uncomplicated as possible, because the Lord is almost returning and Paul didn't want the people to be constrained by any competing loyalties. "You've been bought with a price," Paul reminds the Corinthians of the radical reversal of the status quo in Christ – those who were slaves are freed in Christ and those who were human masters are slaves of Christ, and all people are made equals because all have been bought by the blood of the lamb. Of course to our modern ears it is especially problematic that Paul didn't urge those slaves who were made free in Christ to leave their masters, but this too is related to the fact that Paul expected Christ's return any day. Virgins should remain as they are if they can, but if not then there is no shame in marrying. But, *"those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that."* Paul wants to spare the unmarried the stresses and anxieties that come along with married life, if possible. So, the one who marries does good, and the one who can refrain from marrying does better.... But, as Luther says, that requires a special gift of grace from God.

Chapter 8

Now Paul addresses issues of "true knowledge," freedom, and maturity in Christ as it relates to the Jewish Christians attitude towards the Gentile Christians. In this time, there was no supermarket to go buy meat from. The meat that was available, usually was the meat that was leftover from making sacrifices in the pagan temples in the community. It was also common practice for employers to hold business banquets in the

temples themselves, so if you wanted to get ahead in business or trade you had to attend those parties. This was a non-issue for Jewish Christians who had grown up believing that there was only one God period, and that all the pagan deities did not really exist. They knew that it was just meat, it held no special significance because they did not believe the pagan gods existed. And, apparently they began to quarrel with the Gentile Christians and tried to assert their “true knowledge” on them and their freedom to do as they please as it pertained to meat. For the Gentile Christians, who grew up worshipping in those temples and believing in those gods and offering sacrifices to those gods, eating meat sacrificed to the pagan deities was akin to practicing idolatry and so they refused to eat meat sacrificed to idols, because they felt guilty doing so because it felt like they were slipping back into their old worship habits. Paul addresses the Jewish Christians in this passage, as a Jewish Christian himself, saying that of course your knowledge is correct, BUT if you present your knowledge in a way that is spiritually harmful to a brother or sister in Christ, then you’re in the wrong. It’s better to be loving than to win an argument at any cost. It’s better to engage in practices that build up the whole Christian assembly than to do something harmful to a brother or sister to prove a point or to assert your freedom in Christ at the expense of another believer’s conscience.
